

**OVERLOOKING THE EVIDENCE:  
GENDER, GENRE AND THE WOMAN DETECTIVE  
IN HOLLYWOOD FILM AND TELEVISION**

by

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The investigating woman, the female detective, or the lady crime solver poses a productive problem throughout the history of Hollywood film and television. Investigating women fundamentally disrupt the scopic and narrative regimes upon which Hollywood genre films depend. I argue that the investigating woman changes the way that the detective genre operates in four distinct modalities: the Adventurer, the Avenger, the Comedic and the Affective. Each mode articulates the figure through sometimes unlikely generic combinations. And in each mode the investigator performs femininity with a different valence. The female investigator thus becomes a space to explore gender's transformative effect on genre, different kinds of looking, and gender as performance.

I examine what happens when films fail to evoke what Barry Langford calls the "generic unconscious." Genres only work if they are recognized as genres, if they exist with a productive feedback loop between producers, texts and audiences. Films featuring women detectives do not activate the semantic and syntactic markers of the detective film. They are burdened with the adjectival. They are "women" detective films. And the "woman" part moves these films, sometimes forcibly, into other generic terrains: the woman's picture, melodrama, horror, comedy, romance, adventure.

Each chapter investigates a mode through close reading several transhistoric texts ranging from *Sherlock, Jr.* to *Zero Dark Thirty* that serve to illustrate the possibilities held within the modality. In my conclusion, I test my taxonomy in the laboratory of television where the figure moves through several modes in a single program, sometimes a single episode. From 1957's *Decoy* to *Veronica Mars* (2004-7), this fluidity is both the strength of investigating women in a genre that is powered by novelty, and a sign of the abiding lack of ease a woman who looks creates, manifested on the level of genre. These modes do not solve the problem of the investigating woman in film, but rather make the problem explicit. The modes serve to expose the contours of the problem through the films' failed attempts to resolve it.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Investigating women in Hollywood cinema are a problem. But they are not the same problem that women generally are in film. Investigating women are not the puzzle to be solved or the prize to be won or the crime to be avenged. Movies about women who look, who solve crimes, who investigate are different; they work differently from films that feature men doing these things. Investigating women interrupt the smooth running of genre because they fundamentally disrupt the scopical and narrative regimes upon which Hollywood genre films depend. And yet they are still genre films. They work according to the rules of genre, and as such the lens of genre is the most appropriate to view them through. The problem is that one genre is never enough to contain them.

Genre is performative; if it does not reproduce itself effectively, it is not a genre. Films featuring investigating women do not in themselves constitute a genre, nor can they be usefully considered a subgenre of the detective film. If audiences and producers do not understand films as belonging to a genre, then they are not a genre. Instead, films featuring the investigating woman swerve and borrow, push and pull from a rich array of generic codes, both semantic and syntactic. In this study we will see the ways in which tropes and rhythms from adventure films, romances, comedies, melodramas, horror movies, thrillers and *noir* are activated and combined with narratives around investigations in frequently ineffective and uncomfortable ways.

Like genre, femininity is performative. It is not an essential category, but sets of behaviors. It is not stable. Not only do the codes change with the historical moment, but they depend on the context of the one performing them. Drawing attention to this fluidity challenges the idea that

gendered behaviors are constitutive of identity. The investigating woman performs femininity explicitly as a performance, something she can shift and adjust based on her needs. It is a tool at her disposal and sometimes a trap from which she cannot escape.

Genre is a place where femininity is performed and as such, the intersection of genre and gender has been a vital place for feminist theory. It is also a vital place for genre theory. I investigate this place where gender and genre cross through the figure of the investigating woman. I argue that this figure operates and organizes genres that can be taxonomized across Hollywood film history into four modalities: the Adventurer, the Avenger, the Comedic and the Affective. Each mode operates in distinctive ways and brings a different but overlapping array of genres to bear. In each mode, too, femininity is figured distinctly—from the masculinized but highly sexual Avenger to the gently maternal and sexually demure Affective investigator. These modes do not solve the problem of the investigating woman in film but rather make the problem explicit. These films' failures to solve the problem are exciting. The modes serve to expose the contours of the problem through the films failed attempts to resolve it.

What happens when a woman looks? This question, at the heart of feminist film theory is the heart of this dissertation. What happens when a woman looks *in cinema* is fundamentally different from what happens when a woman looks in any other art form. We see her looking. We are invited to look from her perspective, but she does not need us. There is something about the action-based, verb-driven idea, "she investigates," or "she solves crimes," that is very rich and fundamentally different from the gendered activities that films about women offer—"she loves" or "she has babies." It is not that those aren't very worthy things, but there is always the sense that

a woman is acted upon in those scenarios, first by the lover, then the child. The fact that these women "do" is clearly of ringing importance throughout this work.

This sense of women as active is different from how women in the history of art are shown. Even those who looked boldly out of their frames, mocking, challenging, seducing, do not at heart change the hierarchy of looking.<sup>1</sup> While she might be granting you permission, and mocking your need to drink in her beauty, she is still there for your contemplation.

In cinema, looking is an action. In Hollywood cinema, looking organizes everything that happens; it organizes not just what does happen, but what can happen. It situates us in the narrative, and in a story of investigation; it *is* the narrative. A woman who looks in cinema moves from an object position to the subject, from passive to active, from someone to whom things are done to someone who does things.

This movement is not stable. And there are repercussions that ring through the films I think about, that disrupt their smooth workings within a Hollywood generic context. This project seeks to map, to organize, to taxonomize what happens when a woman looking is the subject of the film, that is, when a woman investigates. The figure of the female detective becomes, or acts as, a catalyst for generic change, precisely because no one genre is able to contain her. As a result, the figure always reaches into alternate generic categories in order to make sense. But this reaching, this seeming narrative necessity becomes the point, not just of generic hybridity, but a way of revealing the limits of the genre. Perhaps even more than a catalyst, she is motor of generic change.

There are several interlocking and interchanging terms I use to describe the investigating

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<sup>1</sup> See John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. (New York: Penguin, 1973).

woman, none of which is entirely satisfactory. I use the term “detective” and its variations and puns, but finally “detective” is too narrow, too specific in its cultural connotations, both in its official (police/FBI etc.) and unofficial (private detective) iterations. It excludes too many figures that I intuitively connect, women that are outside of these legitimized contexts for various reasons, both diegetic and generic. “Investigating women,” women who try to figure things out, is more in line with my feminist film theory leanings. These are women who looked, who mastered the gaze, if you will. But the term fails to fully satisfy my instinct and interest in genre. It is too open-ended. Women can investigate all sorts of things: they can look for treasure, or spies, or vampires or husbands (misplaced or future) or sales, or a job, a break, a free meal, spiritual fulfillment. Women in films are always looking for something. It’s the nature of Hollywood narrative film. But what the women in this study all have in common is that they actually solve crimes. But it is the fact that they are investigating and detecting crimes that ties them together, which both closes down and opens up the field.

The investigating woman, then, is a woman who solves crime on film. She can be official or unofficial; she can be understood in the film as a detective or not. She appears across the history of film, and she persists as a recognizable figure without accruing the density of convention around her that would constitute a genre or even subgenre. This is because she always exists as a loci of generic complication. Even in the most seemingly straightforward detective genre picture, if a woman stands as the detective something fundamental changes in the genre.

The detective, in the context of the genre of detective film, is always male, that is to say for it to satisfy its generic requirements, its syntactical and semantic elements, the lead figure is understood as a masculine one. The term “detective film/movie/genre” does not apply to the woman detective. Always, and necessarily, there is the gendered qualifier. This demonstrates not

only a gender difference but a genre difference. Girl, woman, lady, female, old maid, spinster: whenever a gendered term is put in front of the word detective something fundamental slips within the genre. It is pulled into new genres, creating new hybrid forms. As genres are not monolithic things, there is room, and the way in which that room is created is by generic hybridity. I am not arguing that there is something like the pure detective genre picture. But rather, when a man investigates a crime in a film, that movie will be categorized as a detective picture, a woman in the same role will not have the same consolidating effect.

The examples I explore within this dissertation were not, for the most part, conceived to be feminist. They were conceived to be novel, new variations on what might at times be considered rather stale generic grist. What is of interest here is the way in which those variations manifest themselves, the transformations that occur through making one seemingly simple change: the gender of the detective from male to female. All of the films in this study are narratives of investigation. Each protagonist seeks to solve a crime. But that is not all that happens. Instead there is a rich array of connections, intersections and uncomfortable conjunctions that disrupt the smooth running of the investigative narrative. This is different than the red herrings and misdirections of the traditional detective film. Instead of those red herrings and misdirections being on the level of the narrative, they exist on the level of genre. It is only at the level of genre that we can begin to see how she works, how she changes, and how she doesn't.

By reconceiving films featuring the figure of the investigating woman from being an imperfect detective films to being, by their nature, generic hybrids, we can gain a richer understanding of how exactly she works. The work of this project has been archival in certain ways, retrieving and organizing films that were not considered detective films and placing them next to ones that fit the category a bit more easily. The juxtaposition is illuminating. Janet Staiger

writes in her article about *film noir* as male melodrama, “Whether constructed ex post facto (as the term *film noir* was) or used at the time (as the label *melodrama* was), the critical function of using categories is to see things perhaps not otherwise visible.” This is my operating assumption: thinking the figure through genre in these ways can reveal something, make something visible, about both the ways in which the labeling of genres operate and the ways the figure herself works.

Because these investigators are so inherently independent they disrupt classic cinematic ways of figuring women within patriarchal culture. They are active, not passive. Independent, not subordinate. Subjects, not objects. As such, their existence poses an inherent resistance to patriarchal structures. Indeed, this is the conclusion of the scholars on the subject and I do not wish to rehash their contributions.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I will examine what happens next. What are the repercussions of these disruptions on the film? I argue that the female investigators create disruption not just visually and narratively, but on the level of genre; they fundamentally alter the way in which the detective genre works, pulling what begin as fairly conventional films into sometimes peculiar and frequently uncomfortable generic territory. The ideological contradictions she presents require dramatic shifts in tone, in genre, bizarre framing stories, narrative contortions that stretch credibility, the suspension of disbelief to the breaking point. It is not so much the idea of a woman detective that is so inimical to audiences, but rather that the cinematic maneuvers that are deemed ideologically necessary mar an easy understanding. What is at stake with the female

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<sup>2</sup> See Lisa M. Dresner’s *The Female Investigator in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co., 2007). Her introduction to her chapter on film is especially lucid, 114-118; Linda Mizejewski’s *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Kathleen Gregory Klein’s *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre, 2nd Edition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995) and Philippa Gates’ excellent *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011).

detective is the very fact that while there have been a few cycles where she has been acknowledged, most of the time she remains hidden and unnamed.

## 1.1 WHO IS THE INVESTIGATING WOMAN?

The figure of the investigating woman appears across many genres and is inflected by many genres, but she does not, as such, constitute a genre in and of herself. Nor does she constitute a subgenre of the detective film, a place where it would seem she would naturally fall. On its most basic level, the woman detective does not constitute a genre because she is not recognized as such. Rick Altman theorizes that three shifts have to happen before full genrification can take place: 1) “abandoning an add-on-approach” 2) a shift to “display shared attributes stretching beyond the genre’s eponymous material” and 3) the audience had to be aware of the structures and expect them when making meaning of them.<sup>3</sup> The films featuring an investigating woman fail to fulfill these maneuvers. This might seem tautological, but genres only work if they work, that is to say, if they provide a set of rules and expectations for producers and audiences. To say “the female detective film” is to assume too much unity within the texts that feature her. It certainly is not an industry articulation. In my research I have found no ways to search out films with the label, which also shows that spectators do not see the films that feature her as constituting a genre, or even a subgenre. As we see her more frequently since the 1980s, this is beginning to shift. But there does not exist enough consistency between the texts to call the “female detective film” a generic

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<sup>3</sup> See Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999) 53.



category. The female detective always has the adjectival emphasis that sets her apart. Her gender and sexuality are what mark her as different, which in terms of generic change and shifts within the industry would seem to fit the difference that generic development demands, but her difference is seen as too great to simply swap out a male figure for a female, thus she fails to exist within a syntactic unity with the generic body.

The investigating woman appears in established genres. For instance, I would argue that Ingrid Bergman's character, Paula Asquith in *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944) acts as detective, but it does not make sense to call what is clearly a gothic melodrama a detective story, nor would it make sense to call *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) a detective story because Jamie Lee Curtis acts as a detective, or *Psycho* because Lila Crane uncovers Norman Bates' secret. And yet, these characters do spend narrative time investigating crimes. I do not want to reinvent the wheel, nor do I want to ignore the way these films function within their genres because they feature a woman I identify as a detective. I do not want to lift the figure out of the contexts in which she exists, but rather I seek to understand why she exists in so many contexts, or rather how she exists in so many contexts and yet is still, I would argue, a recognizable figure.

I am investigating, on one level, what happens when a genre movie fails to evoke the generic unconscious. Is it still a genre film? If so, what genre? Images of investigating women do not evoke or tap into an ideal text. Or rather, they do but in surprising ways that do not simply evoke or replicate generic constructions, but often undercut or transform them, simply by the fact of their gender. When a woman too obviously tries to evoke the detective Ur text, in something like, say, the film version of *V.I. Warshawski* (Kanew, 1991), it is an epic failure because the disjunction between the ideal and the reality is made apparent. And yet women detectives, if they do not share a visual repertoire, or even the essential elements of the genre, are still detectives and

they share a heuristic field with each other. And the exploration of that field and the ways in which it interacts with the more commonly understood detective genre is one of the points of this work.

When the woman detective is the protagonist of a film, she pulls the contours of the investigative narrative towards different genres. There is no such thing as an investigating woman in Hollywood cinema operating solely within one genre. She creates narrative discomfort because she is the very site of generic intersection. She has her own magnetic field. We understand that genres change and combine kaleidoscope-like all the time. However, we do not always look at the ways in which they combine, and what binds the two together. We can tell when it is not working; those uncomfortable mash-ups end up diminishing both sources. But that is interesting, too. Why don't they work?

If a woman steps up to the role of detective, she is given a sort of adjectival status that never resolves itself into a noun.<sup>4</sup> That is, she is always marked as different from the norm, she is never *just* a detective. She is always a *woman* detective. She is in excess. This difference is not just marked in language (and of course visually) but also generically. The fact that the detective is female forces a generic change. Connecting these sometimes historically diverse films can help shed light on the different moments in which the films under discussion appear.

But the investigating woman has more than adjectival status linked to other genres; her presence, in fact, changes and inflects, in consistent ways, the various genres in which she appears. I believe in the explanatory powers of genre theory. I think it has distinctive strengths. But it does not explain everything. I have found that there are four distinctive modes that she operates in

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<sup>4</sup> This is the first move towards genrification according to Altman. See especially his discussion of the process of genrification in *Film/Genre* 62-68.

*across* genres. That is to say, the way a woman acts as a detective might not be the same in all horror films, for example, or all screwball comedies. In fact, she might use the same techniques in one horror movie as she does in a screwball comedy. These connections, these modes as I call them, are what connect these two otherwise disparate films. Or on the other hand, the investigating woman in a *film noir* might have more in common with an investigating woman in a screwball comedy than she does with the dominant female characters of *noir*, the femme fatale or the femme attrape.<sup>5</sup>

While the figure of the woman detective exists in various incarnations, cycles and recognizably throughout the history of cinema, the films in which she appears do not constitute a genre. As we move into the future, especially as women detectives on television become ever more entrenched with new shows featuring them appearing every season, the films do begin to stabilize retroactively. These films are the genealogy of today's televisual detective heroine, but they are also an extremely diverse group of films that do not hold together under any of the conventional definitions of genre.

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<sup>5</sup> This is a term that emerges from Jan Wager's book *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). The femme attrape is the opposite of the femme fatale, the domesticated and domesticating woman. A perfect example is Ann in *Out of the Past* (Tourner, 1946), but think of any of the good wives and girlfriends that *noir* heroes escape from.

## 1.2 HOW HAS THE FEMALE DETECTIVE BEEN UNDERSTOOD CRITICALLY?

There are four key texts that address the investigating woman in film: Kathleen Gregory Klein's *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre, 2nd Edition*, Linda Mizejewski's *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, Lisa M. Dresner's *The Female Investigator in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* and Philippa Gates' excellent *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film*. Throughout this study, I will be returning to them, depending on their insights and sometimes arguing with their conclusions. I'd like to begin by briefly reviewing the vital work these scholars have accomplished.

Klein's study examines the woman detective in the novel. While I do not undertake any examination of the novel here, the position she takes is extremely important and foundational to my own work. In her introduction she vividly outlines her stake in the woman detective:

Since the 1864 appearance of the first professional woman detective, she and her professional competence have been consistently undercut despite overt claims for her abilities, successes, intelligence, and cunning...The unacknowledged sabotage of these purported heroes is the focus of this book.<sup>6</sup>

She goes on to argue that there are fundamental contradictions between "woman" and "detective" and that the codes of sexual bias consistently outweigh the generic codes. This position is one from which I emerge. She goes on to tirelessly show how this contradiction works throughout the history of women detectives in novels. Her focus is particular. She is not interested in making some of the linkages between different kinds of investigating women that I take on in this project, but keeps

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<sup>6</sup> Klein, *Woman Detective* 1.

her eye firmly on the paid professional. But her idea that “the script labeled ‘detective’ did not naturally overlap or even mesh with that labeled ‘woman,’”<sup>7</sup> runs through this work. My interest is not proving that it is true, which Klein does quite ably, but rather in exploring what precisely happens at that point of conjunction.

Linda Mizejewski’s book *Hardboiled and High Heeled* is also interested in this intersection. One of her central questions is the disjunction between the prevalence of the female detective in novels and her spotty appearances in film and television, even in the wake of the tremendous success of *Silence of the Lambs* (Demme) in 1991. She is concerned with issues of reception and spectatorship, with the fantasies the female detective engenders and the different ways in which these are negotiated in novels and in film and television. These are important questions, and ones that I will take up in the course of this project. Mizejewski bounds her study in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, like Klein, she takes as an initial category of her study the *professional* woman investigator. Secondly, because this is a profession that has largely been closed to women for much of the century, she necessarily circumscribes the time frame she investigates from the 1970s to the moment of her publication, 2007. She provides a compelling narrative of the professional female detective in film from Blaxploitation films through the early 2000s. And Mizejewski is interested in the woman detective’s inherently disruptive power: “So when the detective genre switches gender, when it’s a woman doing business at the dick shop, the shockwave is visceral, physical, sexual.”<sup>8</sup> My work goes outward from this in several ways. First, I loosen up my definitions of the woman detective, and as a result open up the scope and *types* of

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<sup>7</sup> Klein, *Woman Detective* 4.

<sup>8</sup> Mizejewski, *Hard Boiled*, 14.

films I'm looking at. There is, of course, crossover, but my approach is firmly rooted in thinking about the way genre works through the figure rather than in the way in which she is received, which is the heart of Mizejewski's concern.

Lisa Dresner also follows the investigating woman across media in her book. She sees the female investigator, a term she categorizes more broadly than Klein or Mizejewski, as incorporating women who are not always professional. She includes the paranoid wife in the gothic films, doctors (*Coma* (Crichton, 1978)), reporters (*Smart Blonde* (MacDonald, 1936) and even a dead opera singer (*Thriller*, Potter, 1979). However, her central conclusion is that "female investigators in film are insane."<sup>9</sup> She articulates the problem of the investigating woman in this way:

If male protagonists in Hollywood films—even non-detective films—are often granted a privileged role in relation to vision due to their alignment with the camera as desiring subjects, then we might read them as being in some way constructed by Hollywood codes as "natural" investigators, particularly "natural" investigators of women. If women—the "unnatural" investigators—investigate men—the "natural" investigators, then it might not surprise us to see the female investigator's role complicated by the fact that her intended prey has looked back at her, has turned her own weapon of vision against her, and that under this unexpected scrutiny she appears mad.<sup>10</sup>

She builds a compelling argument. She goes through dozens of films and shows how in each one there is a moment when the female investigator is figured (often explicitly) as mad. She claims this is the result of the conflict between a cinematic apparatus and the way sexual difference is codified by Hollywood film.<sup>11</sup> Where she and I part ways is that she seems to see this madness everywhere, even when the protagonist isn't explicitly figured as crazy. Part of my difficulty with

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<sup>9</sup> Dresner, *Female Investigator*, 114.

<sup>10</sup> Dresner, *Female Investigator*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Dresner, *Female Investigator*, 114.

Dresner is the term “mad” itself, with its inevitably Victorian, judgmental and old-fashioned overtones. But finally, this argument is unsatisfying. I am interested in exactly how the investigating woman works within genre and if we can think about her more expansively and more precisely.

Philippa Gates’ *Detecting Women: Gender and the Hollywood Detective Film* is very important addition to the literature. It works as something like a companion book to her 2006 book, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and Hollywood Detective Film*. She offers a rich historical context for understanding the crime-solving woman throughout Hollywood history. Her work putting these films together is invaluable. And her feminist intervention bears some similarities to my own, but again the critical difference is genre, of offering a way to think of the figure *through* genre. It is *through* genre that the madness and the discomfort and the excess that all of these writers have so beautifully articulated is manifested. My intervention then is not my use of feminism to think about the figure, but to really interrogate, from a feminist position, how genre functions when she is around.

### 1.3 ON GENRE

Genre is a complex, conflicting, and constantly evolving hodgepodge of shifting priorities, star vehicles, artistic visions, and market forces. There is no purity in genre; purity is death for a genre. There can perhaps be a perfect example, a pinnacle of a genre, but that, too, is a shifting target. So why do we talk about genre? What use does it have for us? Like all taxonomies, genre is a way in which to organize and understand the world, or at least a part of the world. And like all taxonomies,

it is as revelatory of the culture that produced it as the phenomena that it purports to organize and explain. But like all taxonomies, genre has to have some stability in order to have any explanatory power. The challenge that comes when we talk about genre is that the stability, the shared quality that carries from film to film within groupings, is as much affective as it is anything quantifiable. There is no precise equation for a first-class genre film. If there were, we would have far better romantic comedies than are currently being produced.

All of the films I interrogate in this study are genre films. They are, for the most part, not art films; they are not deep meditative works about the human condition. They are very rarely even works of someone we could consider an auteur. They are products of the Hollywood genre machine. They may not be *just* genre films, or belong to a single genre, but they use a recognizable set of conventions to tell their stories. It is important that we understand these films as genre films, even if it is not always clear to which genre they belong, even if they are pulled between the tropes of multiple genres, they are certainly not alone in doing so. But the fact they do not belong to a *named* genre, or even a clear one, is precisely the point. If, following Barry Keith Grant, genre films pursue “ideological projects as cultural myths” then the fact that the genres featuring investigating women are, itself, muddled and muddy has profound ideological implications.<sup>12</sup>

What, in its briefest terms, is genre? Genres are not hard and fast, but fluid and changeable. They serve to help us group, but under any critical examination of genre as a critical term, its contours melts away like sugar. Ironically, for the scholar, it almost seems that genre is *most* useful when it remains unexamined, when it serves as a sort of shorthand that means different things to

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<sup>12</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Shadows of Doubt: Negotiations of Masculinity in American Genre Films*. (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 2010), 5.



different people. And yet, there are connections. I understand that what I think of as a vampire movie is not the same as it is for the fans of *Twilight*, but at the same time, I understand that there is a connection, and the Meyer's franchise is doing what new texts do, especially new wildly and broadly popular texts: expanding and redefining the conventions.

Barry Langford writes in his conclusion to *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* about the ways we understand genre. He evokes and transforms Frederick Jameson through the idea of a 'generic unconscious,' that "persists within, beneath and around genre texts and sets their horizon of signification whether they are fully conscious of it or not."<sup>13</sup> Some images, like a stagecoach crossing a river, are impossible to think about without being aware of the director that made the image famous (John Ford). But

others are so absolutely 'generic', transcending the need for a specific textual referentiality – a private eye climbing into a taxi and telling the driver to 'follow that cab' – that their inclusion is equally evocative of the 'essential' (or ideal) genre text that Tzvetan Todorov (1990) suggest theories of genre need to invoke as a heuristic fashion.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the work of this introduction, then, is to outline the contours of the various and sometimes conflicting generic unconsciousnesses that the investigating woman evokes.

When I talk about genre, I am talking about something very real. But I am also talking about something that has soft outlines, that melds and shifts and slips from one's grasp. There are other categories that have more precise meanings—cycles, historical periods, films by particular directors or by particular studios. But when we go to the movies that is not always how we understand films. We want to see a horror movie or that new action flick, or the Romcom starring

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<sup>13</sup> Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 274.

<sup>14</sup> Langford, *Film Genre*, 274.

whatshername from that show.

My use of genre then, is two-fold. There is the scholarly side of me, that attempts to examine the phenomenon of genre precisely, that looks around and above and tries to understand what makes certain genres tick, and there is the side that uses genre in the sense of common usage: what does a detective film feel like? Scholars are frequently fans as well as academics. There is a rich scholastic context to this conversation, and one in which I'm doing to my best to fully participate. My particular topic takes me into some odd corners; those odd corners, in fact, are what drew me to the topic in the first place.

While none of the generic combinations that I explore are new, what intrigues me about the investigating woman is the sheer variety of genres and combinations she occupies. This makes her a unique figure in cinema. Because of her pervasiveness and generic breadth, she has something to say about genre itself, about femininity and genre, and the means of generic hybridization. Some of the places I find her force me to think about particular generic combinations that have yet to be fully theorized. In fact, it is really only when a genre becomes stabilized that it seems to garner scholastic attention. But these are generic combinations that never settled, that never took off, at least not yet.

The woman detective comes with her own narrative structures that are different then the male detective's. When she is situated within a genre, the genre cannot stay pure, but instead become enmeshed and entangled in other generic tropes and structures. That then gets fed back in to that genre's development. The woman detective is a terrific place to study the different ways these genres work. Because films featuring a woman detective are always *about* the problem of the woman detective as much as they are about the investigation, the film always begins to lean toward the woman's picture with its own semantic and syntactic codes, with its particular forms

of address. The investigating woman tells a story about the telling of stories, about the way we negotiate genre, about what happens in terms of narrative when a woman steps into a masculine role and a masculine genre. It is a truism that, cinematically, a woman cannot have it all: A successful career and a successful personal life. The professional woman tends to be tamed, drained, and made unthreatening. Investigating women throughout cinema have negotiated this contradiction and there are various ways in which it is resolved, however tenuously. The ways are aligned with certain generic tropes. They are not the same for all investigators and not the same within all modes.

#### **1.4 THE FEMINIST INTERVENTION**

I make the claim that by examining the female detective we can see the way in which narrative change occurs. She both creates fissures in the generic structure and splices them together. You cannot just plunk a woman down in the same script, taking the place of a man, and expect it to be the same. Things change at all sorts of levels. I think here of the switch from *Front Page* (Lewis Milestone, 1931) to *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940). Both films employ the same basic storyline about two reporters and the attempt to save a man from the noose. But when Hildy is a woman things change. The gender shift leads Hawks to add a bit of romance, double the central tension with the romantic; it becomes a different story, a different plot, a different genre. It moves from a mystery to a romantic comedy.

The investigating woman occupies the fault line between genres and even within genres. Her introduction to any genre is simply too riddled with internal contradictions to hold her. These

internal contradictions are ideological and feminist film theory is the best way to understand the nature of them. At the moment of ideological crisis, another genre comes into the picture. In this, the investigating woman is distinct from the male detective, who—because he is the status quo to which the genre refers—does not demand generic miscegenation, mixing. Although there certainly are some male detectives who indeed do straddle generic categories, he doesn't have to. The female detective film can never be confined to a single genre but always stretches into another because she is a woman.

The women investigators frequently use their femininity as a disguise, as a trap for the unwary. This is not at all to say that they are “unfeminine” per se. Throughout these films, however, they are figured as not proper women, implicitly, through their lack of “proper” relationships, and frequently explicitly by other characters. And indeed they do not tend to operate in a traditionally feminine manner at a job that is considered masculine. As such, they bring into question what femininity is.

Joan Riviere in her article, “Womanliness as a Masquerade” struggles to understand how a woman can be both feminine and masculine, that is, to be a woman and have intellectual power and prowess. She seeks to understand how these two seemingly irreconcilable positions exist and how the anxieties they produce can be negotiated.<sup>15</sup> Doane in “Film and the Masquerade” posits that femininity is by its nature fluid but not whole. Femininity is always lacking somehow.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade.” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (1929).

<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 17-32.

female as agent of investigation seems to undo these dichotomies of masculine and feminine by articulating, both visually and narratively, the fluidity of those poles and by positioning women as having the capability of doing social good through active intellectual investigation. This move requires a reevaluation of certain assumptions on which classic feminist film studies rests. At the same time, it exposes the very trauma that they take as their starting point.

If womanliness is, as Riviere asserts, itself always and already a masquerade, then why does shifting between various articulations of womanliness create narrative trauma? Shifting between different versions of femininity makes vivid and clear the constructedness of those articulations. If there is some stable identity that grounds the performative shifts then does not that seem to undo the idea that femininity is constructed and not inherent? If performing femininity is a task that is necessarily a masquerade, does a woman have an identity that isn't constructed? These films seem to offer an affirmative response, and the figure offers an identity that is not purely confined to ideas of femininity. The female detective both exposes the constructedness of feminine identities and the myth that being a woman who is active, intellectual and with her own distinct self is a contradiction, is, in fact, not a woman.

The difficulty that an active female protagonist poses is in many ways the reverse case of the dilemma facing much of feminist film studies. One of the central questions of the field is how female spectators align themselves with the ways in which women are represented on the screen. This has been addressed in various ways. Of course Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is the place to begin; it is the essay that posed the question in the first place. This provocative work has been both the ground and the jumping off point to a generation of feminist film critics. Moving from Mulvey's initial understanding that women's pleasure as spectators is intrinsically masochistic, subsequent theorists have posed the notion of a double

desire cycling through both the object and subject positions. This idea of multiple points of identification has been taken up in queer studies, and in fact opens up the idea of identity itself. What does it mean when we say that we identify with someone on the screen? In what position does that identification put us? What are the politics of identification? This path is a twisting one with arguments and counterarguments stretching over thirty-five years. If “[t]he major breakthrough in feminist film theory has been the displacement of its critical focus from the issue of the positive or negative representations or images of women to the very organization of vision and its effects,” then what better place to examine the way women look than in roles where her job is to look.<sup>17</sup>

But is a woman’s pleasure in looking no longer masochistic if the gaze is no longer (only) objectifying women, but rather giving her an active subject position? And while this seems to go against the drift of Classical Hollywood cinema, as we will see there has often been a sort of counter-direction. This counter-direction is not a linear path and it is fraught with representations far from a feminist ideal, but there is a drift and it is one I would like to lay out here in broad strokes. I am not trying to make a claim that these figures are ideologically subversive. They are produced by the same meaning-making machine that all mainstream cultural products are. Rather, the ways in which these women are represented serves to illuminate the outlines of the ideological structure. How do we negotiate the conflicts that arise?

Doane writes in “Film and the Masquerade” (which, like Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is a deliberate provocation) that “the intellectual woman looks and analyzes,

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 176.

and in usurping the gaze she poses a threat to an entire system of representation.”<sup>18</sup> As Linda Williams discusses in “Melodrama Revisited,” the distinction between good melodrama and bad is whether it is distanced enough from the feminine: “It was almost as if there were a “bad” melodrama of manipulated, naively felt, feminine emotions and a “good” melodrama of ironical hysterical excess thought to be immune to the more pathetic emotions.”<sup>19</sup>

But through looking at the cinematic traces of history, we can see the various ways this “problem” has been negotiated. Frequently, we find in many early instances of women detectives that the mystery is the man: a husband or boyfriend usually. He is either to be discovered in his evilness or uncovered in his innocence. This allows the threat of their existence to be, to some degree, contained. On the one hand, her goal is the conventional one of domesticity, thus rendering her foray into the public world limited. Once the threat to (or of) her lover is resolved, then the world will return to normal and she will return to her place. On the other hand, the threat of (or to) her lover already exists within the domain of the domestic, of the home, a place no male detective investigates. Or, rather, the male detective can investigate *other* people’s homes, but not his own. We also see her highlighted in her singularity, the lone woman in a sea of men. Finally, we see her in the comedic register, in ways that both make the space of her investigation more innocuous and exist in the space of fantasy.

Even if the crime isn’t completed (serial killer tales, for example, shift the crime to the future rather than the past), the unsolved murder always leaves open the possibility that murder can happen again. It is a loop that must be closed in the detective story; there must be a return to

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<sup>18</sup> Doane, “Film and the Masquerade,” 27.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revisited,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Ed. Nick Browne. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 44.

normalcy, to the world where the rules apply. But in that in-between world a murderer opens up with his destruction of the illusion that the law can make us safe; the rules no longer hold. This allows a place for the woman investigator to come forward. Her rule breaking doesn't carry the same valence as it might in another kind of narrative because *none* of the rules are working. When the world is returned to its axis through the solution of the crime, however, so too must the woman return to her place, or so these films want to tell us. But even if we are willing to believe that a woman has a place and it is not solving crimes, a woman's place looks quite different after she has done something like this. The frame of the ordinary world no longer holds.

In her discussion of *Humoresque* (Jean Negulesco, 1946), Mary Anne Doane articulates what happens to a woman who reverses gendered roles with her excessive female sexuality: she dies. But what exactly is her crime? "...[T]he danger she represents has to do with the fact that she upsets and reverses the opposition between spectator and spectacle in terms of the alignment of sexual difference. Helen is the agent of scopophilia."<sup>20</sup> It is for this crime she must die. But of course this is the crime of all good detectives, a compulsion to look. However, we are also looking at them looking.<sup>21</sup> This sort of overdetermined and splintering awareness of looking and being looked at spins off into excess: "...what is in excess in relation to the image is equivalent to what is in excess of the rational."<sup>22</sup> Doane is writing here of the way in which music in love stories of the era supplements and exceeds the affect of the narrative and of the image. But the idea of the rational remains a critical one in our investigation. Thus the woman who looks, who examines, who investigates is already upsetting the rational order.

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<sup>20</sup> Doane, *Desire*, 99.

<sup>21</sup> Doane, *Desire*, 100.

<sup>22</sup> Doane, *Desire*, 97.



Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" offers the dual modes of masochistic identification for female spectators, that is identifying with women characters as they are subjected to the objectifying gaze of the cinematic apparatus, and its concomitant subjugation of the male gaze and the idea of transvestism, or the way female spectators must take on a male gaze, leaving them unanchored in their own subject positions. She sees the transvestite position as inherently uncomfortable. It is looking at oneself through someone else's eyes, and again being forced in some way to submit to that position.

In response to this, Mary Ann Doane offers the idea of the female masquerade. Here, drawing from Joan Riviere's article, she offers that all displays of femininity are in fact a masquerade, a mask, that allows a space between seeing and understanding that Freud's analysis disallows, thus making the development of ego formation. She sees the position of the transvestite as a more playful place, of taking on a different set of expectations and desires. This she argues is easier for women than men, perhaps because of the way in which patriarchal culture has trained our vision through Classical Hollywood cinema. The female position is subordinate, thus less distinct, but allows for more sexual mobility. Even her enactment of her proper mode, that is femininity, is a mask. Thus it is easier to swap out the presentation of sexual identity.

I argue that the female investigator becomes a place where we can interrogate what femininity looks like in the cinema. The figure becomes a laboratory of different kinds of looking, different kinds of gendered performance. The power and dangers of shifting identities is something for which queer theory offers a strong ground, as in many ways this is its subject. Eve Sedgwick, for example, proposes a space to think through these issues without being confined to a series of gendered oppositions: male/female, passive/active, public/private, innocent/experienced. By enacting and playing with these positions, shifting through them, the female investigator opens up

a unique kind of spectatorial pleasure, the knowledge that these are performative not inherent qualities.

Women's ability to change their self-presentation, the taking on of multiple personas in the course of a detective's investigation, is indeed a central trope of the figure, in a way that is quite different from the ways in which male detectives, especially from the classical period, go about their own cases. Humphrey Bogart's Phillip Marlow, for example, in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawkes, 1942), only flips up his hat and puts on some glasses to shift identities.<sup>23</sup> This is a far cry from dressing in drag. His mode of investigation is either disappearing, becoming invisible, or direct confrontation.

Female investigators do not tend to use these modes of investigation as frequently. Their apparent femaleness, highlighted by film, makes it all but impossible for them to disappear; the dominant mode of the cinematic process places them in the world to be looked at, as Mulvey asserts. Nor do they often take on the direct confrontation with its inherent dangers of physical confrontation, especially as for women this includes the constant threat of sexual violence. Thus they take on alternative ways of disguising themselves. They are often in drag, either that of an extreme femininity or costumed as a man. Women are easily judged and placed in terms of their visual presentation and their ability to manipulate and change those presentations is one the deep pleasures of the female detective.

In order to become invisible, that is to investigate without being seen, women detectives often take on the paradoxical position of emphasizing their feminine characteristics to an extreme

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<sup>23</sup> Although this moment, as he tries to gain access to Geiger's (pornographic) backroom could certainly be read as queer.

degree; this is what I mean when I call it drag. It is a masquerade that masks an investigating woman's true identity, makes the fact of her personhood, autonomy, and even the danger of her investigation invisible to those they are investigating (men). Men are dazzled by the sexual provocativeness of their exterior. The women investigators hide in clear sight, subverting (at least in terms of narrative) the dominance of the male gaze; they use it for their own ends. In this, they have clear alignments with the way in which femme fatales use their dangerous beauty. The difference that the woman detective carries is that the narrative makes clear that this is not all that they are. It opens up the possibility that women are more than objects of the gaze, since they themselves manipulate it so well. Who would suspect a stripper/nightclub singer/prostitute of being more than sexual characteristics? Who would expect the object to look back? As with most issues around the woman detective, this is not without a double edge. Even if they are using and manipulating their own image for their own gain, she still must submit to this objectification.

The masquerade must be explicit. Trouble begins when the figure seems to easily shift between positions. The character can only go undercover as someone wildly different from the way in which she is normally presented within the diegesis. That difference must be maintained if she is to remain as the main character. Thus, only the toughest and most masculine, or conversely, the most definitively pure can dress up in a highly provocative and sexualized way. In *The Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), Kansas is only able to portray her hep kitten side (and her ecstatic dance) because we know her to be a good girl with a proper job. It is a manifestation of the way in which the films turn from thriller to horror, the way that the hunter (detective) becomes the hunted (victim).

## 1.5 THE GENRES

Throughout this dissertation I use several interlocking and at times conflictingly defined generic categories: The detective film, the adventure film, the melodrama, the women's picture, comedy, thriller, horror. Each mode activates and articulates the codes—semantic and syntactic, visual and narrative—that make up the different genres. While it is not an unusual thing for a film to combine several genres, to borrow iconic images, semantic tropes, narrative patterns from genres not its own, there are clearly combinations that we see more frequently that are more consonant. This could be because they are only tenuously differentiated in the first place, as in genres that came from the same root: thrillers and horror, for instance. However, I would like to spend some time on the front side clearly (or as clearly as possible) delimiting what I mean when I use each term.

### 1.5.1 Detective Film – Mastery, Vision and Action

In *A Short History of the Movies*, Gerald Mast writes, “Part of any narrative art is making the audience ask questions and delaying the answers. Every interesting movie since *The Great Train Robbery* has learned ways to make us ask ourselves what happened next, what made that happen, who did it, how will the hero get out of this one, and so on.”<sup>24</sup> The detective becomes an ideal figure to represent the spectator, in that the asking of questions, the figuring out, is explicitly the topic of the narrative. One of the first places early filmmakers looked for their narratives was to popular fiction, and the detective story has always been one of the *most* popular of genres.

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<sup>24</sup> Gerald Mast and Bruce Kavin, *A Short History of the Movies* 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pearson, Longman, 2006), 55

According to William Everson, Sherlock Holmes became the first detective to appear on film as early as 1903.<sup>25</sup> The appearance of Holmes demanded that the audience participate with their own understanding of Sherlock. When the detective more generally was used it depended on audiences to know the figure and the kinds of stories he was in already. While there have been many women writers of detective fiction as well as fictional women detectives for nearly as long as the genre has existed,<sup>26</sup> there are few figures as instantly recognizable as Holmes.

The detective demands a certain complexity of plot and narrative in order to exist. In one of the earliest examples of the fictional detective, Edgar Allen Poe's C. August Dupin, we see a character who is almost purely intellectual.<sup>27</sup> He solves the crimes through deduction rather than physical confrontation. Likewise, Sherlock Holmes, although he physically investigates, solves the crime through ratiocination. This is difficult to portray on screen without a complex narrative and cinematic structure for getting the ideas across. The screen detective during the silent period is unable to indulge in interrogations or share his clever intellect out loud. Even with the coming of sound, the screen detective moved away from his literary forbears and into action and mystery.<sup>28</sup> It is not terribly interesting, or cinematic, to sit and watch somebody think. But as the cinema

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<sup>25</sup> William K. Everson, *The Detective in Film*. (Seacaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1972) 4-5. He refers to *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (Arthur Marvin, 1900) made by American Biograph Company in 1903 the same year as *The Great Train Robbery* by the same company. Everson traces the iterations of Sherlock Holmes films as a sort of outline of the development of the genre.

<sup>26</sup> See Sally Munt's Chapter "Masculinity and Masquerade or Is That a Gun In Your Pocket" in *Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, (New York: Routledge, 1994) for a strong if quick overview of the mainstream of women writers and fictional detectives, 1-29.

<sup>27</sup> See "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), widely considered the first detective fiction story. He reappears in "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842) and "The Purloined Letter" (1844).

<sup>28</sup> Everson, *Detectives in Film*, 4.

explodes in content, quantity and complexity in the 1910s, so do films featuring the character of the detective or sleuth and the generic structures around him begin to emerge. Everson goes so far as to claim:

The mystery story was also the dominant theme of the silent serial, its combined elements of the unmasking of a hidden villain, the amassing of clues, the gradual discovery of the hiding place of a secret formula or buried treasure being particularly well suited to the mechanical and often exotic construction of the chapter play. Mysteries were far and away the most popular type of silent serial....<sup>29</sup>

What, then, are the semantic and syntactic signs of the detective genre in film?<sup>30</sup> To answer this question, we must first begin with the detective genre as a whole. In his very influential essay on the topic, Todorov describes the structure of the detective genre, or at least of the whodunit, as a wheel within a wheel, containing “not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. In their purest form, these two stories have nothing in common.”<sup>31</sup> The detective is the hero of the story of the investigation. The detective story has a remarkable semantic and syntactic unity through the history of film. The figure of the detective remains one of the most instantly recognizable, whether it is Sherlock Holmes with his deerstalker, pipe and magnifying glass or Philip Marlow in trench coat and fedora. These are the iconic images of the detective and are still activated today. Sherlock Holmes was rebooted in two films starring Robert Downey, Jr and directed by Guy Ritchie in 2009 and 2011 (*Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows*) not to mention the extremely popular modernized BBC version starring Benedict Cumberbatch and now

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<sup>29</sup> Everson, *Detectives in Film*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> The codes for the detective genre in TV are quite different and, in fact more available to being figured by a woman.

<sup>31</sup> Tzvetan Todorov. “The Typology of Detective Fiction” in *The Poetics of Prose*. Richard Howards, trans. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) 44.

in its fourth series. But this image is, exclusively, a masculine one.

The detective is the upholder of the law in spirit if not always in letter, a figure driven to see justice done. Cinematically, we most often see him as a lone figure, outside (to some degree) of the actual apparatus of the state: even when working on the police force, he is a “maverick,” unwilling to be confined by the rules that govern everyone else if they get in the way of his investigation. The genre works in many ways, and perhaps for that reason has a similar amount of stability as the Western. There is a mythic quality to the detective’s active search for truth. He is physically strong, independent and intellectually acute. He has experience and street smarts. He knows every one and has a multitude of contacts in all walks of life. He is fearless.

One of the peaks of the detective genre exists within *film noir*. Numerous scholars from Frank Krutnik to Phillipa Gates see these films as negotiating the territory of masculinity.<sup>32</sup> While there are different cycles and valences from *Charlie Chan* to *Klute*, the detective genre shares a fairly consistent structure that is deeply embedded in cultural articulations of masculinity. The active investigative look is figured as inherently masculine within patriarchy. It mirrors the scopophilic gaze that is one of the determining pleasures of cinema. The detective genre makes looking the topic of its narrative, and through the detective’s gaze we possess knowledge. Even in decadent detective stories like *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1981), mastery is still at stake. It is the thing that makes the detectives. Their lack is the story, the motivating anxieties of the films. With the loss of mastery comes the loss of moral clarity.

Women in detective films are always *in contrast to* the detective figure, often set up in

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32 See Phillipa Gates *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) and Frank Krutnik *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*. (New York: Routledge, 1991).

direct contradiction. The woman is antithetical to this structure. More, she is the object under investigation, the knowledge to be possessed. Thus, when the plot turns on this figure, the narrative emphasis must twist to take the scopic difference into account. Thus the codes and images differ from the stability of the detective genre as a whole. Because of her gender, she investigates in a different way and is in danger in a different way. She often must rely on others (men) for protection against physical/sexual threats. The narrative patterns are different from the male detective (which largely makes up what we think of as the detective genre) and the female. This is not to say that there are not cycles featuring a woman detective that would certainly constitute a subgenre, which follow the codes and show an internal stability and match, or at least rhyme with, the detective genre as a whole. But a very specific set of markers and terminology must be in place in order for this to be so.

The *function* of the character of the detective, in Thomas Schatz's terms, is an articulation of the problem of law and order and the individual vs. the community. These are issues in all genre films, genre films being inherently conservative.<sup>33</sup> This line between justice and revenge, between the Law and the personal (thus the cliché, "This time it's personal!") is a common trope in conventional detective films from *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) to *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987). However, the women tend to use very distinctive methods of investigation that set

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. (New York: Random House, 1981), 25-6. "In each of these genres [detective, gangster, musical], the characters' identities and narrative roles (or "functions") are determined by their relationship with the community and its value structure. As such, the generic character is psychologically static—he or she is the physical embodiment of an attitude, a style, a world view, of a predetermined and essentially unchanging cultural posture. Cowboy or Indian, gangster or cop, guy or doll, the generic character is identified by his or her function and status within the community."



them apart from male counterparts like Sam Spade or Sgt. Joe Friday. So when a woman takes a man's job, this is an inherent break in the ideological structure that has to be rectified one way or the other. But it cannot be resolved squarely within the generic discourse of the detective film, because the detective film refers to a male detective: he is critical to its function.

Schatz characterizes genre films into two broad categories: genres of determinate contested spaces (the Western, the detective, and the gangster) and indeterminate civilized spaces (the romantic comedy, the musical). While as genres, these two categories share many of the same ideological concerns with Americanness, they function differently. The first deals in solving and defeating oppositional forces, and the second with integrating or synthesizing in the shape of the couple. The first has masculine heroes and the second female. Schatz is clearly drawing very broad lines in the sand, but there is something at the heart of his argument that rings true. This is why the introduction of a female detective causes such ideological disjunction: because it is against the very functionality of the genre itself. "One of the reasons for a genre's popularity is the sustained significance of the "problem" that it repeatedly addresses. Thus generic conflict and resolution involve opposing systems of values and attitudes, *both of which* are deemed significant by contemporary American culture."<sup>34</sup> Finally, Schatz's articulation of even something as seemingly specific as the hard-boiled detective film (as opposed to *film noir* or the classical detective) is too muddy and muddled to be of much use as an analytical tool. He changes the rules at will to include things he feels fit, even if they fail to account for the most basic premise of his description (detective).

The genres to which these films would *seem* to most clearly belong are inherently

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<sup>34</sup> Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 34.

masculine. The detective is a masculine figure and while clearly there is a body of work that re-thinks those codes, it is deeply embedded in them. “Genre conventions depend for their existence on their serialized repetition, and in turn this repetition allows individual genre movies to partake of, to modify, to question, and to subvert their generic traditions and the ideology they have tended to endorse. No genre is inherently reactionary or progressive.”<sup>35</sup> But in order to even begin this project it is important understand where a film lies within its (perhaps various) generic tradition. Pushing female detectives to the outskirts of generic traditions, disallows them the option of participating in, or subverting those cultural myths.

### 1.5.2 Thriller

Closely connected to the detective film is the thriller. The thriller shifts from the whodunit, that is, solving a completed crime, to a story where the crime and the story of the investigation are entangled. It is a shift in narrative focus. Martin Rubin’s definition of the detective thriller, which unlike the traditional whodunit, prioritizes the investigative narrative over the story of the crime (according to Todorov’s typography). The thriller more generally is defined by suspense. A lot of it. Rubin writes, “The basic element of suspense is inherent in virtually all storytelling; but in the case of full-fledged, thriller-level suspense, these elements become so acute that other aspects of the narrative are overridden by our curiosity and anxiety over what is going to happen next.”<sup>36</sup>

Curiosity and anxiety. An intriguing combination that the female investigator, herself,

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<sup>35</sup> Grant, *Shadows of Doubt*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Rubin, *Thrillers (Genres in America Cinema)*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30.

often invokes. Rubin is discussing the sensation that is created in the audience, and I am discussing the characters. But the thriller as a form, Rubin tells us, invites a certain over-identification with the characters: “Thrillers characteristically feature a remarkable degree of passivity on the part of the heroes with whom we as spectators identify....The thriller is a form with a strong sadomasochistic appeal: we derive pleasure from watching characters suffer...but we ourselves also suffer by virtue of identifying with those characters.”<sup>37</sup> While we see this relationship happen in melodrama as well, it is the *type* of emotion that marks the thriller as different. Perhaps we might even say that those types of emotions are deeply gendered.

Rubin is not particularly concerned with gender in his book; indeed the issue is remarkably absent. He writes of a line of films he calls “damsel-in-distress thrillers” that runs from the serial queens of the teens through to *Halloween*. He writes, “The forms that such films (especially when they center on a woman trapped alone in a house) is somewhat different from that of thrillers centered on male action-heroes – less wide-ranging, more confined.”<sup>38</sup> This both ghettoizes female action heroes and fails to account for their presence, in positions far more complex than being tied to the railroad tracks. And indeed we will see how their presence troubles, or fails to fit squarely in, his otherwise quite useful typology.

In the detective thriller (one of four types of thriller that Rubin outlines), the investigative story line is emphasized through the personal involvement and vulnerability of the investigator in the case. He identifies three levels in which those vulnerabilities and involvements are manifested: physical, emotional, and moral. The physical element seems quite clear: the thriller detective is

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<sup>37</sup> Rubin, *Thrillers*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Rubin, *Thrillers*, 54.

more likely to be beat up, shot at or drugged than the classical detective. Of course for women, the looming possibility of sexual violence is always present in a way that is never is for a man (unless it is the idle threat of forced prison sex—a cliché).

Rubin is referring here to emotional involvement with the victims. Who is murdered matters personally to the investigator. But here, her emotional involvement is with the killer, rather than any victim. This is a scenario that we see repeated from *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1990) to *Copycat* (Jon Amiel, 1995). While Rubin does emphasize that emotional involvement can and frequently is romantic or sexual, and that these relationships tend to end unhappily (in his words “the detective’s love interest dies or otherwise departs at the end of the story” as if there were no difference<sup>39</sup>) or involve a betraying femme fatale, they do not tend to have a close emotional relationship with the killer. They know when they go into it that she is trouble. The emphasis on the emotional and romantic relationship with the killer creates a dramatically different valence than even the most blinded of gumshoes gulled by the most evil of femmes. Because when investigators are women, there will always be emotional involvement. It is overdetermined from the get-go. The affect is ratcheted up when they realize their error. They become the woman scorned as well as the next victim.

The moral involvement that Rubin sees as the third entanglement of the detective in the thriller is perhaps the most difficult to parse with women detectives. Women in thrillers tend to be relatively clear-cut. Women in the constructs of these films do not tend to have a lot of motivational ambiguity. There is a strong tradition of women being good or bad. When a good woman becomes mired in moral challenges, it is not just her but femininity itself that is threatened

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<sup>39</sup> Rubin, *Thrillers*, 196.

and threatening. In cinema, a woman protagonist is never just a single individual but must stand for all women. This creates an almost unbearable narrative weight upon her. Thus any moral ambiguity in a woman detective is never just her own, and looms large, pulling the narrative into unexpected generic directions.

### 1.5.3 Adventure

I would like to consider the Adventure film separately from its more well known cousin, the Action-Adventure. The action film, or action adventure is deeply associated with a cycle of films from the 80s and superhero films, full of chase sequences, fight scenes, and special effects. The fundamental difference might be that the action film is oriented towards violence and fighting while the adventure film is more interested in movement, travel and conquest.<sup>40</sup> The adventure film is something of an old-fashioned construct deeply tied to the early days of cinema, when film was sometimes the only way audiences had a glimpse of worlds beyond their own. Adventure films take the audience outside of the everyday world. Largely, it is a quest narrative. Most discussions of the adventure film spill into the action film, as action is a primary contemporary genre, but I would like to keep the two distinct.

In his book on the subject, *The Romance of Adventure*, Brian Taves goes to great pains to delimit his subject, to separate the adventure films from westerns or war film, crime or science fiction, and most importantly action, which he calls a “style of storytelling that runs through many genres, a male-oriented approach dependent on physical movement, violence, and suspense, with

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<sup>40</sup> See Tim Dirks article on the Adventure Film on AMC's *Filmsite*.  
<http://www.filmsite.org/adventurefilms.html>

often perfunctory motivation and romance. Action tends to shift sentiment, character, dialogue, and family to the background.”<sup>41</sup> An Adventurer, on the other hand, is impelled by an idealistic worldview and a belief in patriotism, chivalry, and honor.”<sup>42</sup> I translate these terms, with their historically deep masculine and imperialist connotations, into a sense of “fair play.” Taves writes, “Adventure films reconcile the often antithetical doctrines of protecting individual rights and the obligation to a social order.”<sup>43</sup> The Adventure film is a fundamentally ethical, perhaps even moral, genre. But its tone is optimistic. The adventure film has the vivid moral clarity of early melodrama. It is easy to tell wrong from right, and we watch confident that right will prevail.

But importantly here, the genre is distinguished by the character of the Adventurer. The Adventurer is imbued with a sense of what Taves mildly calls, “positive exhilaration,” which hardly seems to capture the crackling swashbuckling verve of Errol Flynn.<sup>44</sup> Tim Dirks claims in his entry that Adventure films were “intended to appeal mostly to men.” However, Taves would offer this caveat: “there is nothing inherent in the structure and the stereotypes of the adventure film to specify its central protagonists as either male or female.”<sup>45</sup> However, the vast bulk of his study is devoted to male heroes. Some important distinctions must be made to make the adventure genre square with a female detective. While the adventure film depends on the sense of exotic locations, I would argue that what constitutes “exotic” is qualitatively different for a female. Indeed, all engagements made freely in the public world are “exotic” for a woman, a glimpse into

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<sup>41</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Taves, *Romance of Adventure*, xi.

<sup>43</sup> Taves, *Romance of Adventure*, 171.

<sup>44</sup> Taves, *Romance of Adventure*, 112.

<sup>45</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 57.

a different world. It is her free motion through it that is exhilarating. For a woman, the city is full of booby-traps and cannibals.

#### 1.5.4 Melodrama

Next to the detective genre itself, the melodrama is the most fundamentally important genre to this study. In a recent talk at the University of Pittsburgh, Ben Singer said that melodrama is whatever you want it to be.<sup>46</sup> Coming from a scholar who redefined, or carefully uncovered, historical uses of the word, this is both liberating and terrifying. If it means whatever we want it to, then how do we mobilize it as an analytical tool? The best we can do is to carefully lay out what we mean when we say it, connecting it and separating it from other uses.

In his book *Genre and Hollywood*, Steve Neale has two genres that he feels are “special cases” that need an extended exegesis: *film noir* is one and melodrama and the woman’s picture, which he links together.<sup>47</sup> I will address the woman’s picture separately in a moment. But in the last thirty years melodrama has been articulated as its own entity, with its own historical and generic outlines and context. While the development of the ideas of melodrama has been deeply tied to feminist film studies and the woman’s picture, I do not believe the two can at this point be fully untangled. I do use the two terms differently in ways it is vital to make clear.

There are two strongly competing but certainly not autonomous definitions of melodrama, and part of my draw to the term is this internal tension. There is melodrama as was theorized by

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<sup>46</sup> “Global Melodrama: Cultural Particularities & the Question of Emotional Universals,” Feb, 7. 2014, University of Pittsburgh.

<sup>47</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 51.

feminist film critics and used, if not synonymously, then overlapping with the Women's Picture. This definition is dependent on melodrama's difference from Classical Hollywood cinema, on its excess, in terms of affect and mise-en-scene. In this framework, melodrama is always "too much" and outside of the bounds of good taste. The second strong trend in thinking about melodrama arises from Ben Singer's historically situated work on melodrama as a genre of (not necessarily gendered) adventure from the early days of cinema. The setting and situation would be adjectival (to use Rick Altman's term), allowing for everything from cowboy melodramas to space melodramas, just as "female" functions as an adjective, rather than a possible inherent quality for the detective.<sup>48</sup> Singer sees melodrama as an underlying structure to which adjectival semantic elements are overdrawn.

This might seem antithetical to the more modern conception of melodrama as a genre that depends on its affective appeals. However, Linda Williams describes melodrama as "an evolving mode of storytelling crucial to the establishment of the moral good."<sup>49</sup> While this establishment is solidified by an affective call (frequently to pity or outrage), morality and affectivity are not the same. As such, melodrama is quite well suited to the detective story and inherently ideological. Linda Williams attempts to think of melodrama in a way that negotiates these two competing definitions. She writes,

...[T]he familiar Hollywood feature of prolonged climactic action is, and I would argue has always been, a melodramatic spectacle ... no matter how goal-driven or embedded within the narrative it may be. ... While usually faithful to the laws of motion and gravity,

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48 As genres become more fully established, their structures differentiate through repetition. That is a cowboy melodrama eventually becomes the Western, and the Space Melodrama eventually becomes Science Fiction. While their common roots can certainly be traced (see *Star Wars*), they exist as two separate things.

49 Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 12.



this realism of action should not fool us into thinking that the dominant mode of such films is realism. Nor should the virility of action itself fool us into thinking that it is not melodrama.<sup>50</sup>

In this formulation all films that feature action, and detective films both classic and contemporary would certainly fall into this category, are melodramatic. Her thrust here is to untie the opposition between realism and melodrama. In terms of the female detective in general, and the Adventurer in particular, there is always a sense that she is “too much.” The female detective always seems to exceed the rules of realism placing her within the realm of melodrama.

Williams’ intervention is certainly critical to my modeling, but does not solve all the issues to which the question of melodrama gives rise. She posits, “If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately concerned with a retrieval and staging of virtue through adversity and suffering, then the operative mode is melodrama.”<sup>51</sup> The focus on victimhood in melodrama (in all of its formulations) is precisely what complicates the detective genre that depends on Mastery. The basic structure of the detective plot, as Todorov showed in his essay on the detective, is a wheel within a wheel: the detective is always belated, re-creating the crime.<sup>52</sup> The crime has happened. The detective figures out what happened. However, like Schrodinger’s cat, the act of investigating, of looking, changes things, sets new acts in motion. The traditional role of woman-as-victim in melodrama makes the filmic instantiations of female mastery within the genre ontologically complex.

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50 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 21.

51 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Tzvetan Todorov. “The Typology of Detective Fiction” 42-51.

### 1.5.5 Woman's Picture: The romance and the weepie

Under the name “woman’s picture” can already be subsumed many genres. The term has as much to do with the mode of address as with genre. Molly Haskell in her book, *From Reverence to Rape*, was one of the first critics to put not just a name to but an important valuation on the weepies, the filler of those “wet, wasted afternoons.” As Haskell so trenchantly puts it, “In the woman’s film, the woman—a woman—is at the center of the universe. Best friends and suitors...live only for her pleasure, talk about her constantly, and cease to exist when she dies.”<sup>53</sup> Mary Anne Doane in *The Desire to Desire* argues that the woman’s picture crosses genre, from *noir* to horror. But the grouping has an important value and genre in general is about address and how audiences understand films.

Ester Sonnet explores these ideological implications of *unnaming*, if you will, or generic instability, in her article, “Why Film Noir? Hollywood, Adaptation, and Women’s Writing in the 1940s and 1950s.” She writes,

The difficulty of adequately stabilizing a description for the sort of writing of which *Daisy Kenyon* is a representative—women's fiction, popular fiction, best-seller, and middlebrow modernist—is indicative of the way in which some women’s writing is historically consigned to oblivion because it cannot be admitted to pre-existent categories and is therefore unavailable for inclusion in any one canon formation that might allow it to endure. From this perspective, the attempted incorporation of *Daisy Kenyon* within the generic body of film noir is an interesting attempt to achieve that through what might be termed a process of categorical masculinization. To appreciate this strategy more fully, it is important to recognize that the concept of film noir is itself enmeshed in the phallogentric gendering of culture and has worked well to efface women's engagement with production of its canonical film texts.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987) 155.

<sup>54</sup> Esther Sonnet, “Why Film Noir? Hollywood, Adaptation, and Women's Writing in the 1940s and 1950s” in *Adaptation* Volume 4, Issue 1, 1-13.

What constitutes a genre is deeply imbricated with issues around gender. That is to say, films that deal with gender are often generically unnamed or subsumed under masculine generic categories even as they have their own distinctive generic markers. There is something at stake in naming a text. Calling *Daisy Kenyon* (Otto Preminger, 1947) a *noir* seems to value its qualities that set it apart from the women's film, rather than necessarily even finding it similar to them. Although there are definitions of *noir* that are big enough to encompass the film, thus Sonnet misses the point somewhat in her article. Calling *Daisy Kenyon* a *noir* does not only mean not naming it a women's film (which it clearly is) but stretches and expands the definition of *noir* to encompass a film with more complex portrayals of women.

As we've seen and will continue to explore throughout this study, genres cross and mingle all the time. But naming them and grouping them has a particular analytical power. Largely, woman's pictures are movies about women and their concerns and addressed to women. They exist within women's worlds, which means that they are frequently confined to the domestic sphere. And specifically they can refer to a fairly well delineated historical moment, from the late 30s through the Sirkian family melodramas of the 50s. Clearly, this is a category that cannot be ignored when investigating the woman detective.

There are two main branches of the woman's picture: the weepie and the love story. While we could certainly fold both under the umbrella of melodrama—indeed we could fold all the genres in this study into melodrama—this move strikes me as not just untidy, but without the analytical heft that I need these terms to carry. The weepie turns on feminine sacrifice. In these stories, whether maternal melodramas or romantic, the ritual move is towards a sort of feminine self-abnegation as a sign of love. The love story is endemic to Hollywood filmmaking as a way of

reinforcing the other generic resolutions,<sup>55</sup> but when it rises to the center of the story its address is specifically to women. It assumes a sort of overinvolved and over-identified feminine spectatorship because affect is raised to a position above reason, above plot.

### 1.5.6 Comedy

Comedy would seem to be the most clearly delineated of the genres that the investigating woman occupies. If it's funny, isn't it comedy? But it is also the most difficult to articulate in terms of genre. I am using comedy here in a couple of ways. First in the classical sense that opposes it to tragedy, these narratives that end not with death but some sort of social rejuvenation. Secondly, I am using comedy as an articulation of the tone and feel of a film. I shift between thinking of comedy as both star- or comedian-based and a classical, structure-based approach. Comedy is a notoriously shifty topic to attempt to pin down. Indeed, much of its appeal lies in this very fluidity.

In her article, "Comedy, Melodrama and Genre," Kathleen Rowe points to two seemingly contradictory characteristics that define the comedy. First, it is antiauthoritarian; it is an "attack on the Law of the Father and a drive to level, disrupt and destroy hierarchy... Comedy breaks taboo and expresses those impulses which are always outside social norms."<sup>56</sup> The second characteristic is "an impulse towards *renewal* and *social transformation*."<sup>57</sup> These two ideas are

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<sup>55</sup> See here for example, the way the romantic plot doubles the "show" plot in musicals. Rick Altman's *American Film Musical* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>56</sup> Kathleen Rowe, "Comedy Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter." In *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. Eds. Kristine Brunvsha Karnick and Henry Jenkins. (New York: Routledge, 1995) 43.

<sup>57</sup> Rowe, "Comedy" 44.

vital when comedy confronts the investigating woman as she is concerned with precisely the same things. Her very existence disrupts social hierarchies even as her primary goal is a renewal of social order.

### 1.5.7 Horror

Like the detective film, “the basic structural premise of the horror film is to show the restoration or reconstruction of an order in a portrayed society.”<sup>58</sup> In this it too activates that core melodramatic structure of good vs. evil. However, the horror film is never quite as clear as it seems, and, like many of the genres I’m discussing, has as much to do with mood as with structure. The horror film’s primary goal is to be frightening, to provoke a reaction in the viewer of shock, of fear. But it also has complex ways of creating kinds of identifications that are vital to our understanding of the female investigator more broadly. Once again activation of the horror genre is deeply imbricated in a feminist understanding.

In Bruce Kawin’s rather lovely introduction to his book *Horror and the Horror Film*, with his evocation of boundary-crossing, play, and terror, he articulates horror, broadly, in the following way:

As a genre, the horror film is defined by its recurring elements (such as undeath (sic), witches, or gross bloody violence), by its attitudes towards those elements (such as that transgressing limits is dangerous) and its goal, to frighten and revolt the audience...A film with a particular monster or threat usually is built around a particular fear or set of fears, including the outright fear of the monster and what it can do, as well as of what it represents, evokes, symbolizes or implies.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, *Horror Films* (London: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 8.

<sup>59</sup> Bruce Kawin, *Horror and the Horror Film* (London: Anthem Press, 2012) 4.

Mostly I am interested in what he calls the “reacting figure” who becomes the screen of our fears and anxieties, our stand-in.<sup>60</sup> The structure of the horror film, with Carol Clover’s final girl, is vital to understanding the female detective.<sup>61</sup> It is also in the horror film that Linda Williams articulated the complex reversals in the normative scopic relations when a woman looks.<sup>62</sup> In this understanding the act of looking for a woman becomes the very thing that puts her in danger as her fascinated curious gaze is met by the monster’s and paralyzes her, making her vulnerable to his threat. The way that looking is thematized in the horror film and the relationship between the hunter and the hunted makes it critical to understanding the investigating woman. The shift from active investigator to object of investigation, from the one who looks to the one who is looked upon is always threatening the female detective.

## **1.6 WHAT ARE THE MODES? WHAT DO THE CHAPTERS LOOK LIKE?**

Through my work, scavenging and picking through films that might have an investigating woman as a protagonist, I began to notice patterns, rhythms, and repetitions. These slowly organized themselves into four distinct modalities: The Adventurer, the Avenger, the Comedic, and the

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<sup>60</sup> Kawin, *Horror*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks.” in *Re-vision: Essays, in Feminist Film Criticism*. Eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams. (Fredrick, MD. University Publications of America, 1984).

Affective. I use the word mode here strategically, a combination of its musical and mathematical meanings. It is possible to play the same tune in different musical modes (major and minor being the most recognizable) and having the affective meaning of the piece change radically. In math, it is the most common value in a set of data. Of course, it also has a distinct definition in literary studies, where it can be confounded with genre but has to do with the *manner* in which something is expressed. In film studies, Linda Williams notably employed the term in *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* where she proposes that melodrama is more productively understood not as a genre, but an aesthetic mode which is “more appropriate to its dynamic and protean nature.”<sup>63</sup> And more than that, “a fundamental mode of popular American ‘moving pictures.’”<sup>64</sup> While the melodramatic mode as Williams understands it certainly runs through this work, the term “mode” itself is crucial. Each mode articulates a particular mood, feel, and combination of genres with its own distinctive set of narrative moves, visual patterns and general tropes.

These modes’ borders are not confining. Films frequently shift between them, moving say from comedic to affective to Avenger and back again. In Paul Feig’s 2013 film *The Heat*, for instance, while the overall mood would seem to clearly place in the Comedic modality, it sometimes shifts in tone and structure to the Avenger. The films I have chosen to read as case studies are not usefully considered exemplary, but illustrative. There are already books that survey the field, that list and pool and explore films with female detectives. While our lists might have variations, and our methods of selection for inclusion might be different, we are participating in

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<sup>63</sup> Williams *Playing the Race Card*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Williams *Playing the Race Card*, 13.

the same conversation. I see no need to replicate the work that they have already done, but rather to continue it, pushing it in new directions.

I open my study with the Adventurer chapter, in which I explore the way the female protagonists of *Nancy Drew* (Clemens, 1938) Brian De Palma's *Sisters* (1973) and *Fargo* (Coen Brothers, 1999) are motivated by curiosity. Each investigator is figured as not-quite-a-woman and her in-between status is mirrored by generic shiftings. The films function as melodramas but are not melodramatic in tone, instead the tone borrows from Adventure films with their exuberance and sense of fair play.

In Chapter 2, I look at the Avenger. Recognizable from procedurals, I examine how she is compelled to investigate in ways that question her sanity. The Avenger is figured as the least traditionally feminine, but the most sexualized. Her sexuality rather than simply her gender is a problem in these texts. The thriller becomes a vital generic construct in the Avenger film, as the narrative threads between the crime and the investigations become increasingly tangled. My core text here is *Taking Lives* (D.J. Caruso, 2004), and is bracketed by two films by Kathryn Bigelow, *Blue Steel* and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012).

The third chapter takes on the Comedic mode by looking at *There's Always a Woman* (Alexander Hall, 1938), *Fatal Beauty* (Tom Holland, 1987) and *Miss Congeniality* (Donald Petrie, 2000). While women-centered comedies strongly tend towards to the romantic variety, films in the Comedic mode are not so confined, and they activate some of the anarchic spirit of classic comedy. One of the central comedic loci is femininity itself. However, the ways that comedy interacts with the investigative genre can call into question that exactly is the butt of the joke.

My fourth chapter investigates investigators in the Affective mode. They investigate for and through affective intuitions. I begin with a brief look at *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924),



move on to a discussion of *Black Angel* (Roy William Neill, 1946) and finish with *The Gift* (Sam Raimi, 2000). If the Avenger was the *least* feminized of the modes, the Affective is the *most*. She is articulated and defined by her traditional feminine roles: lover, wife, mother. The genres that we see her in also put her in the traditional role. When these films slip into horror, she is the victim and the final girl, when it activates the weepie, she is the self-abnegating figure at the heart of it. The women who work in this mode have skills that are tied to her feminized attributes and most importantly her love becomes the diving bell of the investigation.

In my conclusion, I test my taxonomy in the laboratory of television. While the investigating woman is wildly popular in this medium, she still creates and has to navigate the same anxieties as her filmic sisters. Through an examination of *Decoy* (1957-8), the first program to feature a woman detective and *Veronica Mars* (2004-7), I show how the figure cycles through the position I developed within a single episode and in the context of the season as a whole. I argue that this fluidity is both their strength in a genre that is powered by novelty and a sign of the abiding lack of ease a woman who looks creates manifested on the level of genre.

## **2.0 THE ADVENTURER—BECAUSE THEY WANTED TO**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The first mode, the Adventurer, is perhaps the most recognizable of all the investigating women I will be discussing in this study. Emerging with the more complex narratives of the Nineteen Teens, and especially the Serial Queens, the narratives of this mode focus on an investigating woman as an Adventurer: curious but singular. She is active, curious, and independent. Her visual representation can be pictured as the only female in a sea of men. The Adventurer solves crimes for her own curiosity and sense of adventure. The Adventurer mode is used to describe the playful excitement of an investigation. The puzzle is there to be solved and the woman wants to investigate it for the fun of it. With an irrepressible sense of curiosity, the detective will take risks and enter the fray against all advice but her own.

The Adventurer is represented by a rather beguiling contingent of the awkward, old, young, and not quite conventional to contemporaneous models of femininity; they are females that are not quite women. Other women in films of this mode are, or are associated with, the victim of the crime and are figured by a highly conventional femininity. The Adventurer is shown as an exception and this exceptionality allows her a great deal of freedom and mobility, which she relishes. Her lack of conventionality marks her interior difference. That is, the difference of an Adventurer's appearance and behavior marks a difference in her nature. She is not like other

women. She is different. The way in which difference is emphasized in the films of this mode marks it: visually, narratively, developmentally, and in terms of character. The difference is shown through figuring the Adventurer as *in-between*. She might be pre- or post-sexual like Nancy Drew or Miss Marple, or hovering somewhere between adolescent and adult. Or like Margie in *Fargo*, she might be figured as heavily pregnant, that most in-between of states actually in the process of transformation.

While the woman detective disrupts the smooth running of genre as we saw in the Introduction, the Adventurer mode is still structured around a mystery, an investigation, a detective story. This structure functions as the dominant narrative construction.<sup>1</sup> The detective story has, at its root, a firm conviction in the moral order and its establishment; it is the disruption and the reestablishment of this order that the genre takes as its subject.<sup>2</sup> Any establishment of a moral good is by its nature an ideological construct, designed to show proper ways of being in the world. Women have frequently been portrayed as the vessels of this moral good, often embodied in their sexual purity.<sup>3</sup> The Adventurer's in-between status marks her as inherently pure, and thus removes

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<sup>1</sup> The Adventure mode is most closely linked to classical English detective novel: the amateur detective, leisured class, with the freedom to follow his own curiosity. Lord Peter Whimsy and Philo Vance. They bear many a lot of the same roots. The Adventurer is, unsurprisingly, most linked to the hero of the action adventure film. And there are similarities in their narrative construction: most notable being a certain episodic quality. Repetition and variation. But what is repeated and the overall narrative structure of each discrete film or episode is quite different.

<sup>2</sup> Heta Pyrhonen's excellent book *Mayhem and Murder: Narrative and Moral Problems in the Detective Story* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) addresses issues in the mystery novel, here, as we talk about structuring narratives it offers a great deal of insight. Most importantly, she divides the mystery story into two narrative drives, one that seeks to find out whodunit, and the other, which seeks to assign guilt. Separating the two questions is crucial to understanding the genre.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the melodramas of D.W Griffith.

the threat of sexual violence against her. If she is not in danger, than she doesn't need to be protected, confined or hemmed in. By taking sex out of the equation, the Adventurer has freedom of movement. But a woman as an active participant, as the subject and not just the object of the film, even in pursuit of what are otherwise upright and pro-social goals, is necessarily disruptive to a patriarchal society and its ideological constructs. This inherent contradiction is at the heart of this study and indeed of the "problem" of the woman detective.

The Adventurer is the most flexible and resilient out of the modes. While she inevitably affects the genre of the film she is in, pulling it like a magnet away from any easy generic constructions, the Adventurer exists in a wider variety of genres than any other modality.<sup>4</sup> The figure herself remains remarkably intact and recognizable across both time and genre. This chapter will begin through looking at the way Nancy Drew, who I see as something of an avatar of the Adventurer is portrayed in the 1930s Warner Brothers series featuring Bonita Granville. Brian de Palma uses the figure in his 1976 film, *Sisters*, for very different purposes in a very different genre, and yet the figure of the Adventurer herself remains recognizable and intact. Finally, we will look to the way Marge Gunderson fills the role of the Adventurer in *Fargo* (Coen Brothers, 1996).

Because of her active adventuring nature, the female detective represents a challenge to patriarchal structures. Out of the modes of the woman detective, the Adventurer is clearest in her identity. She investigates these things because she wants to. She is the most easily defined. And she is self-defined. For this reason, she could be seen as the most dangerous to the patriarchal status quo. She does not align easily with any official structure. Official culture is serious: she

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<sup>4</sup> We'll see how other figures tend to organize a particular set of genres around themselves in other modalities.

solves crimes laughingly and playfully.<sup>5</sup> She tends to make up her own rules as she goes along. Rather than aligning herself directly with the Law (as a policewoman or lawyer, for example), there always seems to be someone at her side, usually a man, or perhaps a maiden aunt, telling her what the rules are supposed to be. These encounters are frequently figured as jokes or as humiliating. They are never neutral. There is always at the same time a voice articulating correct behavior, both within the film as a character and through the film in the ways in which she is filmed and humiliated. While this figure is frequently mocked within the film as well, as we will see with Nancy's Officer Tweedy, or Miss Marple's companion Mr. Stringer in the series of films with Margaret Rutherford from the 60s.

There is way where the Adventurer is not a very dangerous one and her disruptions are small ones and local, seemingly easily able to be enfolded back into dominant culture. However there are ways that these figures, perhaps because they seem so light and innocuous, stretch the ways in which we think of the proper feminine. These figures hold a certain subversive power, as any kid who read Nancy Drew growing up will tell you. But her exceptionality, perhaps we could even say her token quality, alleviates the ideological challenge she represents. The female Adventurer is not part of officialdom, but still outside of it.

Their difference is always commented upon and highlighted by the text, both in terms of narrative and visually. There are no other women in these films that have a similar status. While

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<sup>5</sup> Hildegard Winters in *The Penguin Pool Murders* (Archainbaud, 1932), and the several other films in which she appears, is an Adventurer and solves her crimes with a sly wit and natural superiority. Indeed, there is a frequently a comedic element to films in which she appears. She is a schoolteacher, displaying all the clichés that seems to entail, for good and for that. It is when she stretches (as she must) out of that role into the crime solving one, that we can see the strength and skill that being a teacher entails. The same is true of films in which a nurse solves crimes from the 30s such as Wellman's *Night Nurse* from 1931.

they are investigating they are the only women on the screen. The signature instantiation of this is the image of Clarice Starling played by Jodi Foster in *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) surrounded and dwarfed by male FBI agents in an elevator.

The Adventurer wants something more—something more exciting, something more attuned to her sense of right and wrong, something other than plans laid out for her. There is something at the core of the Adventurer which is unsatisfied. She is hungry for something that regular life cannot satisfy and so she enters into the adventure. This is, in many ways, a mythic opening, and yet the adventuring women investigator is never thought of in mythic terms with myth's generic surety of Orpheus slipping into the underworld. Instead, words like nosy, inquisitive and curious, words that have gendered and diminishing connotations are used to describe her.

Curiosity is a crucial term to the female investigator in general, but critical and defining to our understanding of the investigators who operate within this mode. The curiosity of the investigator is intimately linked with the curiosity of the spectator: both want to know what happens next. This linking of desires, the activity of desire on the part of the cinematic woman, rather than a to-be-desired-ness, is what creates narrative/ideological tension. This creates an intimate and sometimes uncomfortable aligning of vision, desire, and curiosity. The desire to know what happens next is the most basic function of narrative film.<sup>6</sup> One of the satisfactions of the detective genre is that it makes this desire the subject of its story.

Curiosity is local; it is intimate, it is watching your neighbors on the street through your

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<sup>6</sup> See the hermeneutic code in Barthes' *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: FSG, 1974) and Gerald Mast's account of film history in his book with Bruce F. Kawin. *A Short History of the Movies 9th ed.* (New York: Pearson, Longman, 2006).

front window and knowing when something is not as it usually is. It is noticing when something is not quite right. It is intensely feminine. Curiosity is a trait frequently linked with classic ideas of femininity, from Eve and Pandora through Little Red Riding Hood to the modern slasher movie. It is rarely seen or shown as a positive thing, as a drive that leads to knowledge. Marina Warner explicates the way that intellectual curiosity (from the Garden of Good and Evil) is linked to sexual curiosity within our cultural imagination.<sup>7</sup> This ideologically posits that sexual curiosity is the only kind of curiosity a woman might have. Curiosity in cinema is always linked explicitly or implicitly with sexuality, and more than that, with a dangerous sexuality, as if that is the only thing that a woman might be curious about. Bobby Ann Mason makes the same point about Nancy Drew, that her desire for mysteries is her desire for sex, a young person's greatest mystery.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the most obviously curious characters, the ones in which this characteristic is highlighted are presented in these films as decidedly un-sexualized, usually pre- or post-sexual, to disavow this desire. The person in whom curiosity and sexuality meet is a dangerous one who must be ideologically contained.

The Adventurer is motivated by curiosity, with shades of inquisitiveness, prying, nosiness, gossip and hearsay. That is, the way she follows her investigation is not through the careful building of a case, with proper evidentiary support but as a series of inadvertent or intuitive leaps.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marina Warner. "The Making of Pandora," in *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1985) 213-240.

<sup>8</sup> Bobbie Ann Mason, *The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1975) 84.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say she isn't well prepared for these ventures. But her means are all within the realm of communication. Those are her tools, never weapons or anything dangerous in itself. In a way these figures are highly adolescent, in that they are sort of pretending to do real work, but in a safe environment, or at least if they are doing the high-wire they have a secure safety net. That is to say, if they go into a situation with the possibility of real

What is at stake then, is not a *lack* of psychological depth, but a recourse to other generic understandings. Rather than “because she wanted to” being read as selfish, curious, willfulness, in some way not proper womanhood at all (although as we will see, this strain –both tension and biological—still pierces the mode), we can read it instead as a call to adventure, an opportunity to leave the normal world.

In mood, the Adventurer films do not seem to align to melodrama, as mode or genre; in construction, however, they do. This is one way in which the figure of the Adventurer is marked as different from her male counterparts. In this, she refers back to the cinematic models of the Serial Queens from the 1910s and early melodrama’s reliance on action. The tragedy of the classical detective is that his meddling causes the killer to panic and commit yet more murders in a vain effort to cover his tracks. In this, the detective, like the lovers in a melodrama, is always “too late”. But because that is rather bleak, and doesn’t provide the true satisfaction of the world put right (the crime *did* happen after all) there is always an element of “just in time” a last minute rescue or confrontation: a damsel rescued from an ice-floe, referring back to an earlier model of the melodrama as articulated by Ben Singer in *Melodrama and Modernity*.<sup>10</sup>

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danger, they are often linked, explicitly through listening devices or a visual connection, with some masculine bearer of authority who can swoop in to rescue at the last minute. They needn’t even know (and often they don’t) that they themselves are under surveillance.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensation Cinema and Its Contexts*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).



## 2.2 HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE NANCY?

If curiosity is the cardinal sign of the Adventurer, then Nancy Drew is her avatar and apotheosis. Nancy Drew typifies the Adventurer mode of the investigating woman and the ideological and generic complications that women who solve crimes within this modality provoke. In 1938 and '39, Warner Brothers released a series of four Nancy Drew films starring Bonita Granville capitalizing on the popularity of novels first published in the early part of the decade, and echoing the light-hearted and comedic mysteries epitomized by 1934's *The Thin Man* (Van Dyke). This series also allowed the exploitation of the teen market. The four films, all directed by William Clemens, are *Nancy Drew, Detective* (1938), *Nancy Drew...Reporter* (1939), *Nancy Drew...Trouble Shooter* (1939), and *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase* (1939). These are not artful films, with four of them released (and one would imagine produced) in the space of a year by Warner Bros, the most working class of studios. But a close look at these films and the ways in which they activate generic and ideological constructs will help us limn and explicate the Adventurer.

Nancy Drew is always and already over-laden with cultural weight.<sup>11</sup> The amount of time she has been circulating since her emergence in 1930 exacerbates this effect. In addition to the hundreds of novels (rebooted several times), and the four Warner Brothers films, there is a 2007 version starring Emma Roberts and a television series that ran from 1977-79. As a result, it is all

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<sup>11</sup> Hilary Clinton, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, and Sonia Sotomeyer are just a few of the powerful women who claim Nancy as an inspiration.

but impossible to come to any particular text featuring Nancy Drew without, if not prejudices, at least a strong awareness of her cultural position. She remains, in many ways, the definitive figure of the investigating woman. Nancy's translation to the screen has not always been successful (in any of the ways that might be measured: as adaptation, as genre pic, as a financial success) and is frequently dismissed by critics and fans alike.<sup>12</sup> Reading the actual texts, as they exist, can provide us with some very intriguing insight into the ways in which the figure functions within a specific narrative frame.

*Nancy Drew, Detective* is a straightforward, if uninspired, mystery story. It is unique in the series and among films featuring a female detective more generally, because while Nancy's femaleness is clearly an issue on the level of narrative, it does not disturb the generic structure of the detective film. The solving of the crime carries the full weight of the film's structural force. For this reason alone, the film is remarkable. As the series progresses, the films veer into various other generic categories that we will see repeated through films featuring the woman detective: the romance, the adventure film, the woman's film, the coming of age film, as well as throwbacks and references to earlier films featuring a female protagonist, the serial queen films of the teens and the very popular and contemporaneous girl reporter films. While there is always a mystery in every Nancy Drew film, the structural centrality of the mystery is frequently interrupted and displaced onto one of these other types of stories. As the generic structure of the films become complicated, Nancy Drew as a character loses much of her competency as an investigator and more generally, her agency and independence. Not coincidentally, Nancy's femaleness is given more narrative

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<sup>12</sup> Fans tend to resist the *specificity* of any embodiment of the character and any changes to the plot or characterization. Critics dismiss the films as childish.

weight as the structure of the film shifts away from crime solving. The generic constructions align to the success of the character *as* detective. The intrusion of the stereotypical feminine disrupts the generic momentum and brings in other generic tropes that frequently confuse or disrupt our understanding of the films as detective films. That is the more the *fact* of her female-ness is highlighted the less the fact of her being a detective is the generic and narrative focal point. This pushes the film to activate other generic understandings.

We will see structural shifts that move the adventure story into the horror genre. These shifts depend on an anticipation or fear of a murder occurring. This anticipation is both amplified and eased by the fact that we never know more than Nancy. We find out with her. We do not, for example, see the bad guys stalking her while she is unaware. This eases the potential hold of the horror genre. And unlike the classical detective, she never knows *more* than the audience either this moving her out of easy alignment with the detective genre. Together, we find out what happened. Together, we follow the clues. It puts us on very equal footing with her, in an intimately aligned relationship to the character. It is an ambivalent position, however, decidedly different from our relationship to male detectives who know more than we do occupying a sense of mastery. She *is* the audience - only motivated by her desire to find out, even if it takes, as she asserts her commitment to a case, “a hundred million years.”

Nancy refers to her investigative drive and imaginative leaps as “womanly intuition” and this sense is treated as a joke throughout the series. But what is the joke exactly? Partially, it has to do with the fact that she is, in terms of the film *not* a woman: she is a “teenager”. This is an important distinction. She is able to do the things she does, or rather get away with them because she is not yet an adult, not yet a woman. This fact puts her in a strange in-between status. Throughout the series she suffers a series of humiliations because of this status. In *Detective*, for

example, the rather idiotic Police Captain Tweedy viciously denigrates her and dresses her down in public. Nancy has called the cops out to a house thirty miles outside of town where she and Ted had followed a carrier pigeon. She is flanked by both her father and Ted, but it is Nancy who comes in for the scorn and humiliation as Captain Tweedy (quite correctly) sees her as the source of the trouble. While earlier in the encounter he had appealed to Mr. Drew about the long drive and the use of tax payer money, when they go to investigate the pigeon coop that just happens to be in the property but find that Nancy is not able to actually identify the pigeon in question, Captain Tweedy lets loose:

“So, your daughter’s a detective, is she Drew? Well the police have a lot of other things to do besides running around playing kids games. We follow any more of these phony leads we’ll end up skipping rope. Now little girl,” turning to address Nancy, “you better go back to the kindergarten and play with your dolly.” All to the great hilarity of the half a dozen other cops he brought with him. As he walks away he comments to one, “Psychopathic case.”

This is an absolutely typical way of dismissing the female investigator. First, addressing her father rather than her, he expresses incredulity that anyone (the implication here is especially a grown man) could think of Nancy as a detective at all. Then he proceeds to infantilize her (kid’s games, kindergarten), overtly feminize her (skipping rope, dollies) before finally pathologizing her. All in a very efficient 20 seconds of screen time.

These jokes begin to uncover an almost inevitable fact about the way in which female investigators are portrayed: they are *not proper women at all*.<sup>13</sup> There are a series of other signifiers

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<sup>13</sup> This is not a new insight: those who have already written about the woman detective have already explored the way in which this repeatedly happens. Lisa Dresner work is especially focused on it. In her chapter “Why Female Investigators in Hollywood Film Are Intrinsically Mad”, she breaks down a multitude of ways and contexts that the female investigator is figured as insane. She argues that “the spectator’s relationship to the

that align with the “not yet a woman” status. In *Nancy Drew...Troubleshooter* a potential love interest for her father is introduced. Miss Edna Gregory represents a direct threat to Nancy’s position within the household. In an elaborate sequence at the cottage by the lake, Nancy takes on the duties of cooking dinner, the most “basic” of feminine tasks, after their housekeeper gets a raging case of poison ivy. While she begins confident in her abilities, cooking on the wood burning range proves to be a challenge. We see her drop the potatoes on the floor knock things over while trying to add wood, the roast won’t cook and the salads wilt as she accidentally leaves them on the range. She is smudged with soot and sweat. When Edna Gregory arrives cool, collected with a gorgeous cake the contrast is set up to be striking. However, they are both attractive blondes cooking.

The dinner scene serves no purpose in terms of the story; it stops the plot and exists in excess to it. This excess is melodramatic as is the content of this excessive moment: two women competing for the attention of men, with the concomitant jealousy, resentment and an interrogation of femininity. Her father insists on calling her a child repeatedly in Miss Gregory’s presence. Each time, we see Nancy bridle and her resentment of Miss Gregory grow. What is the point of this? It is explicitly to decrease Nancy’s level of threat to Miss Gregory. This is the classic terrain of the woman’s picture. The age gap between them, and the Oedipal tilt of the competition (Nancy resents her father’s interest in Miss Gregory) heightens the melodramatic effect. The fact that it is played for laughs, that we are supposed to find Nancy’s humiliation funny, does not change its inherent

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cinematic apparatus and the way in which Hollywood’s cinematic codes have become inflected with sexual difference combine to make the position of a female investigator totally untenable.” Here we totally agree.

quality. Comedy and melodrama both depend on excess for their affect. Sometimes, as here, the two seem to run especially close.

The contrast between this scene and the one in *Detective* is striking and illuminating. While her dressing down by Captain Tweedy was over the top and humiliating it was the result of her investigation. The humiliation of the cooking scene has nothing to do with the mystery, with her competence as a detective, but rather with her competence as a woman. And she fails. When Miss Gregory steps in, full of feminine grace, not only is Nancy resentful, but her father and Ted exacerbate the effect by tripping over themselves to help her, while they had left Nancy to bumble through on her own. That is, they treat Miss Gregory as a sexualized woman, with the benefits therein. She is afforded courtesy and aid. Nancy the treat like a child, or a not-quite-woman. She does not get the perks of femininity.<sup>14</sup>

The film seems to simultaneously propose the glorification and the denigration of both traditional woman's work and the picture of female independent resilience. There is a sort of double articulation. If anything, the encounter motivates her. She is not about to be put off her case because some stupid policeman puts her down. Nancy is strongly motivated by ego and pride; she wants to be right, especially in this first film of the series. This motivation, rather than a vague desire to "help" is what makes Nancy Drew such a compelling character. She does not simply want to make things right, providing a moral center, she wants to *be* right. It is strangely un-feminine, but a trait we will see throughout the more comedic iterations of the female detective. This desire

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<sup>14</sup> It is necessary to note here the character Apollo Johnson (Willie Best)—all eye-rolling, chicken-stealing, haunt-fearing racist stereotype. As the only person of color we see in the entire film, one wonders at his inclusion. The interaction between Apollo (Nancy and her father seem to find even his name hilarious) and Nancy give Nancy a space to be superior when so much else in the film is making her less. And it's deeply troubling.

to *be* right exists in a sort of cybernetic loop with her curiosity and her sense of fair play. For example, in *Nancy Drew-Reporter* a car hits the bumper of her speedy blue sportster and drives away. Outraged not so much at the damage as by the driver not stopping, she chases the culprit down to a strangely abandoned house. This leads her to her first clue in the case.

While Nancy is shown to be dismayed by her encounter with Captain Tweedy, it does not slow her down. Nancy very nicely apologized to Mr. Hollister and as he walks back in he writes a message and sends it on a pigeon leaving us in no doubt that Nancy was, in fact, correct. In terms of the construction of the film, the narrative allows no time for the audience to doubt Nancy, even as she herself does not realize that she is correct. This puts the audience in peculiar position vis-a-vis Nancy. We know more than she does, but what we know is that she is right. The seeming wrong turn in the investigation and humiliating encounter with Captain Tweedy does not even throw Nancy off her stride as the next scene sees her gathering another critical clue, reinforcing her drive and competence. While all the cops enjoyed the unnecessarily cruel dressing down she received, it just reinforced their innate incompetence in terms of the film, and thus the *necessity* of Nancy's intervention.

In *Nancy Drew Detective*, we see the beginning of the pattern of the Adventurer being solidified. It is a very feminine plot where all the central elements have to do with women. The lovely old Spinster Lady is thinking of giving her money to her alumni girl school where Nancy attends. She disappears and Nancy just knows that there must be some sort of foul play involved. Nancy's "womanly intuition" convinces her. She is wholly in charge of her investigation into this crime and the only one really interested in the case. She pursues it with the zeal and determination of a terrier. She refuses to let go. And she is justified in the end

Nancy is clearly up against actual danger in these films. There are real criminals who

commit real crimes in these films. She is not just figuring out the solution to some adolescent hijinks. Nancy does not deal in murder in these films but in other less easily defined crimes; this is another way in which she is marked as different from her male counterparts who are frequently elbow deep in dead bodies. Rather she investigates around murders. Murder is a symptom of some other crime. The murdered man is not a good person, and is not innocent, thus he is not conceived as a victim. We don't care that he is dead. The chauffeur in *Hidden Staircase*, the old woman (who we never meet) in *Reporter*, the neighbor in *Trouble Shooter*. Only the first film doesn't involve actual murder, but rather kidnapping and a very old fashioned scheme to gaslight an old lady. Nancy defends and protects the innocence of her friends.

In *Nancy Drew and The Hidden Staircase*, there is a murder, but it is not the crime she is investigating. Rather the murder is a sign of the crime. The mystery circles around the fact that two dithering old ladies are about to be suckered out of their home, both by the terms of their father's will, which insists that one of the sisters stay in the house every night or the estate reverts to the city, and the crafty neighbor, who wants the land for himself to sell to make a race track, that most masculine of amusements (at least in the US). Nancy seems remarkably unfazed by the murder and starts from the very beginning to manipulate and manufacture evidence. Because she is outside the law, she does not have to build a case, but rather prevent a crime (the loss of the sisters' home) from happening.

This approach links Nancy to her father. He is a lawyer. Lawyers do not have to find the guilty party, but rather prove the innocence of the accused. In an ideological way, Nancy's relationship with her father is crucial. It is good. It is strong. Carson Drew, as representative of the Law (in the Lacanian sense) and the law (he is a lawyer), and as a figure of force in the narrative, is able to both support and contain Nancy's shenanigans. She is not, in the crudest sense, castrating



him and taking his place. She operates instead under his Aegis. The element that allows Nancy to operate so easily under the rule of the F/father is the lack of a mother figure, both to properly socialize her or to be in competition with.

The films make clear that she is inspired by her father and shares many of his qualities. It's a very nice and subtle touch, the way they echo and mimic each other. They share a certain loving imperiousness. The relationship and the similarity to her father give Nancy a clearer authority. Female investigators frequently have rich and often complex relationship with their fathers. This is a theme that we will see repeated and explored in television programs. The relationship between the investigator and her father in *Veronica Mars*, for example, vividly echoes Nancy's. *Bones* (2005-) and *The Closer* (2005-2012) both explore the relationship of the protagonist with her father in season-long story arcs. Daddy issues are endemic in women detective narratives. In *Suspicion*, for example, the father's presence is so strong and squashing, he doesn't even need to be physically present, but merely virtual in his portrait to have a dampening effect on the relationship between Fontaine and Grant. And many women became cops or detectives because of their fathers. Or at least their fathers are strongly present in their (all but inevitable) explanations of why they joined up in the first place.

The goal of an Adventurer's investigation is more defensive than offensive or retributive. The crimes that they explore are not, for example the murder of a friend and the drive to find out who did it for some sort of resolution. Nancy wants to prevent something bad from happening, not avenge something that already did. It is as if she can sense the moral world being pushed off its axis through seemingly inconsequential signs. This structure pushes Nancy into the adventure genre and away from the wheel within a wheel structure Todorov describes. She is not three steps ahead like Philo Vance or Nick Charles, bringing the whole mess to a chaotic point only to

smoothly explain and solve the crime in one dramatic scene. There is no masterful disposal of red herrings. And yet, she *is* a detective. She is preventative rather than deductive, she is able to be “just in time” rather than too late and this eases the potential darkness of the films.

The investigation of a murder creates a very different construction than the investigation of any other crime. Murder, as an act, is complete and cannot be undone. The investigation of a murder is a process of uncovering what has already happened. In *Detective* Nancy solves the crime of a woman who has gone missing. The factor of a live person, the idea that the crime *will* happen in the future, or rather something that cannot be undone in the future, adds an urgency to the investigation and a different sense of time. This different sense of time moves the investigation toward the adventure story, and the classic melodramatic construction, moving the Adventurer closer to the serial queens of the Nineteen Teens. But trying to prevent something bad from happening also moves it in the terrain of the horror film, the terrible anticipation of murder.

Indeed, when Nancy’s relationship with her father changes, as it does in *Troubleshooter*, the generic borders shift as well. Nancy’s father begins a romantic relationship. The ensuing contretemps are disturbing and humiliating for Nancy, who, as we have seen, is our agent of knowledge, but so explicitly plays out an Oedipal conflict that it is absurd. These plot elements pull the narrative structure into a different generic category, into melodrama. Nancy Drew has more in common with the virtuous suffering victim of melodrama than she might first appear. Her innocence is highlighted, as are her humiliations. She is not a very complex type of character. She does not go in disguise and isn’t even terribly sneaky. She just barges right in to investigate with a distinct lack of subterfuge and a supreme kind of confidence. In this, she is not besieged with the ideation of the masquerade. She isn’t using womanliness as a mask. She is Nancy Drew. There is something almost intrinsically sexualized, or at least hints of dangerous sexuality, about going in

disguise. Nancy is not sexualized, but she is feminized. This process of her feminization is not dangerous, but rather ideologically sound.

So here, in the 1938 children's series, we can see the way femaleness becomes a problem and the way it creates narrative problems. When her femaleness is not a problem taken up by the film, the film can stay comfortably in a single generic structure, can stay successfully in the detective story as we see in the first Nancy Drew entry. There isn't any tension. One could argue that the genre is simplified, perhaps, without the thematic or stylistic complexity of other detective films of the time, but this could be argued of many contemporaneous detective films. This holds true for any genre. There are always some films that are exemplary, that are richer and more complex, and somehow more fully Westerns, or musicals, or what have you. This series of films, then, offers us a rather remarkable place of investigation. While Nancy's modality never shifts, she is always an Adventurer, we can see the ideological complexities of the modality, the problems it creates.

Nancy Drew encapsulates the strengths and challenges of the Adventurer in terms of genre. It is unsurprising that a character who has existed intact for as long, and through as many iterations as Nancy Drew should find herself so flexible. Even Nancy as Nancy spans medium and genres. If Nancy is the avatar of the Adventurer, the Grace Collier in Brian De Palma's *Sisters* mirrors her fairly precisely. But even using this figure who shares so many traits, and even narrative function, the places that De Palma is able to take her shows the scope and flexibility of the character. While Nancy doesn't affect the generic structure as much as she might, De Palma's character warps it.

### 2.3 SISTERS: THEY'RE TWO OF A KIND

Brian De Palma, with his mastery of genre and conventions, coupled with an unending and often perverse desire to manipulate them, offer us an intriguing example of the Adventurer in his 1973 film, *Sisters*. Perhaps best known for its extended and spectacular split-screen sequence and its twisted miasma of Oedipal fantasy, reading *Sisters* as a detective story rather than a horror film or Hitchcock reboot radically realigns our understanding of the film and further enhances our understanding of female investigator in the Adventurer mode.

If we think of this film as a detective film, the genre forces us to rethink the film. Instead of being “just” a horror film, featuring a monstrous woman, *Sisters* becomes something altogether more intriguing, moving us into melodrama (as we saw with *Nancy Drew*) and the ethical questions that are the domain of the detective story. This reading, then, offers us something different than reading *Nancy Drew*. Instead of the female investigator upsetting the smooth running of the detective genre, pushing it into different generic terrains, we will see how a female investigator disrupts the smooth running of a horror film. But we will see, that regardless of the genre, the figure of the Adventurer stays remarkably intact.

From the beginning of the film, there is an explicit and heightened emphasis on looking, and even more specifically, on pathological looking, scopophilia. The opening scene shows us model Danielle Breton (Margot Kidder) and Phillip Woode (Lisle Wilson) on the set of the game show *Peeping Tom*, where she is the blind (unseeing) sexy temptation (object to-be-looked-at) and he is the virtuous contestant who resists taking advantage of her. After the show the two go to dinner against the advice of her doctor/ex-husband, Emile Breton (William Finley). The two repair back to her apartment in Staten Island. The next morning, Phillip goes out to pick up her

prescription and a cake as he has learned it is Danielle's, and her twin sister Dominique's, birthday. Upon bringing the cake back to the bed, he is stabbed in the face and groin by a wild dark-haired creature that is both like and unlike Danielle. He manages to drag himself to a window where he writes 'Help' in his own blood. Grace Collier (Jennifer Salt) witnesses this from her window in the opposite apartment. She calls the police and sets out to investigate the murder.

Our first glimpse of Grace shows her at her typewriter framed by her journalism clips illustrating her motivation. Her vision is framed by her ambition. The headlines also demonstrate a quite antagonistic relationship to the law (which the law clearly reciprocates when she attempts to report what she has seen). The historical moment of the film (1973), at the height of the women's lib movement, exacerbates this tension between career and family, between woman and the Law. Like the other Adventurers, Grace is figured as not-quite-woman. Her status as woman is erased on two fronts: she is infantilized in numerous ways by the film, thus rendering her a child rather than woman, and, simultaneously her almost militant feminism erases her femininity.

The way a female character is marked as attractive in cinema is if men find her attractive. No one pays any attention to Grace as woman. Grace looks like Nancy Drew. She is light-haired and attractive but not sexy. Her appeal is more childlike than siren. (That position is clearly taken up by the titular sisters). She is not flirtatious and does not use her femininity to achieve her goals. Grace is set up in direct contrast with the exquisitely groomed Danielle. Grace is active, and her activity is linked to a lack of femininity. We see it in her hair (a 70s modern shag, short on the top and long in the back) and her leather jacket, her brash manner and her impatience. Danielle, on the other hand, is all feminine, in her pink and white satins and white apartment and her long dark hair framing her delicate features. She is a model, someone whose career is to be looked at. As Breton cleans up her apartment, he instructs her to put on some makeup. She flutters delicately while

Grace is pushy and awkward, poking her nose in where she is not wanted and making a hash of it when she does.

This division between types is reinforced by the marketing of the film. Margot Kidder was promoted as the star of the film, despite this being her first lead feature role. And Jennifer Salt, despite her filmic pedigree (*Midnight Cowboy*, *Hi, Mom!*, *Play it Again, Sam*), is not. Indeed the, 1973 trailer for the film does not even give us a glimpse of Grace, playing the whole as horror. A voice-over intones: “What the devil hath joined together, let no man cut asunder,” placing the entire weight of generic expectations on horror (the devil) and she is joined together (Danielle and her twin Dominique). Grace and her investigation are what disrupts this film from operating as a horror film. Grace as a double of Danielle moves the film into melodrama. Grace as an investigator moves it into a detective narrative. Grace is curious. Her motivations are local. She sees something that cannot be explained. She spies through her window, that classic spot of the neighborhood busybody, and sees something no else does. Like everything else in the film, Grace’s motivation is split. While she is drawn in by witnessing the crime, she pursues it because she wants to, because it is a good story, following a long line of plucky female newspapermen.<sup>15</sup>

Like Nancy, Grace goes through a series of humiliations and roadblocks in the course of her investigation. From the moment she calls the police to report the murder, she is situated as a problem and her relationship with the cops is deeply antagonistic. They are willing to sacrifice an investigation to take time out to taunt her. When Grace begins her own investigation, she is with her mother, which certainly situates Grace as less than professional. She undergoes a motherly

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, we could see this figure who was very popular in the 30s and is optimized by Torchy Blane as the precursor to the Adventurer in general and Grace specifically.

lecture on the fact that she isn't getting any younger, sitting sulkily in the passenger seat as her mother drives, when she hollers for her to stop at a bakery. She barges in asking questions, and leaving the counter help's questions unanswered. Her mom apologizes for her rudeness and politely buys a pastry. When Grace asserts that she's "on to something big," her mother responds, "Are you on diet pills again?" The implication that she is not only on drugs, but drugs designed to make her more attractive feminizes Grace and erases any potential for mastery her quick thinking has gained her. As she is talking to her editor on the phone, convincing him to let her do the story of "A white woman kills her black lover and those racist cops couldn't care less." She says she wants to do her own investigation. "Why not? I know more than those idiot police. I know karate..." This makes her sound both childish and hysterical. The editor gives her permission, but insists on a private detective who takes over the investigation asking her, "Have you ever been a detective?" Once again, denying Grace control over the investigation.

In *Sisters*, the scene we normally devote to the victim and the gory pleasures of death are split, literally, between the victim and his extended death throes and watching a woman watching it. Her horror comes under the sadistic lens of the camera as much as the spectacle of the victim's stabbing and bloody body does. She is equally, if not *more* than the victim himself, the object of the camera's inquiry. The moment of her looking, of getting involved in solving the crime, is one the most visually intriguing in De Palma's work. An extended split-screen sequence, that is perhaps most indebted to Hitchcock and at the same time most stylistically De Palma's, sets up the simultaneity and the division between Grace, the woman who looks, and Danielle, the object of the look and the monster. This moment marks an excess, not just of style, but of genre. The sequence both highlights the fact of Grace's look and simultaneously glorifies and undercuts its power, suggesting her as a detective and a future victim. In *Dark Dreams 2.0*, Charles Derry

suggests that the split screen sets up Grace to be the alter-ego of Danielle, thus linking the two women:

Indeed Jennifer Salt's function in the films as the psychotic's alter ego and unraveler of the mystery ... De Palma counterposes the two separate images in the one widescreen frame – a technique that functionally creates suspense and metaphorically suggests the schizophrenic state of Danielle. By the end of the film the identification between Danielle and her alter ego, Grace is so complete that in the final hallucinatory flashback, when in the operating room the horrible butcher knife is raised to separate Danielle and Dominique, it is the surrogate image of Grace that we see actually attached to Danielle.<sup>16</sup>

While her gaze would seem to be powerful and autonomous, it is intrinsically linked with perversion and psychosis. This link distances us from what would be a natural alignment with the investigator, linked in our desire to know “what happened.”

Because of the split screen, we do not have to trust Grace's vision, we are able to trust our own. This is emphasized by the fact that we know so much more than she does. She is our crime-solver but is always attempting to catch up with what the audience already knows. This makes her not just belated, as all detectives must be, fully with its sense of melancholy, but behind. We are put in a position of superiority over her. We always know more than she does. This has several effects. It reinforces the horror (hardly surprising considering De Palma), even while it articulates the investigative model. At the same time, it places our detective in an intensely inferior position denying her even the possibility of mastery. How smart can she look, if she never knows as much as we do? How can we align ourselves with her in this context, either affectively or visually? The film already makes so many visual jokes at our expense, it can hardly ask us to put ourselves in a position of empathetic alignment voluntarily.

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Derry, *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Film From the 1950s to the 21st Century*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2009), 45.



The split screen sequence is clearly in excess to the generic demands of the story. It is long and elaborate. While this incident does give us crucial information about the plot, indeed gives us the bulk of the clues we need to solve the murder and assign the guilt, it does so by exceeding the conventions of either the detective story or the horror film. We can see this as a product of De Palma as auteur, but we can also see it as a result of using a woman as his investigative center, as if her presence alone demands a cinematic articulation so excessive that she slips us into the melodramatic. Furthermore, in this moment, the two monsters become conflated, a doubling reminiscent of the melodrama. But doubling is also a fundamental construction in the detective story, “Given that the detective and the criminal represent the two fundamental terms of conflict which characterizes the genre, the positional constellation turns these two characters into each other’s doubles.”<sup>17</sup> It is in this doubling, then, that the film slips its generic boundaries in a way that marks its own excess. But it is also the place of conflation, a point of intersection between horror, melodrama and the detective story.

The issue of doubling is one that runs through the woman’s film. Lucy Fischer notes this trope in her chapter, “The Divided Self,” in *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema*. Here she explores several “twin sister” films from the 40’s where good twin and bad (and always this very strong dialectic) are played by the same actress and the narrative follows their direct competition for a man. But what she goes on to explore is how this splitting is “not so much demarcated along the lines of morality (of vice versus virtue) as it does along the lines of gender identification—of “masculine” versus “feminine” poles.”<sup>18</sup> And the issue of doubling, in addition

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<sup>17</sup> Pyrhonen, *Murder and Mayhem*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Lucy Fisher, “The Divided Self,” in *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 178.

to the fact that this is very much a film with women at the center (if not perhaps a woman's film in the way that is generally understood) moves us in the realm of melodrama. As Ben Singer notes in his reading of the melodramas of the serial queens, "The genre is paradoxical in that its portrayal of female power is often accompanied by the sadistic spectacle of woman's victimization."<sup>19</sup> This paradox certainly remains in circulation in the contemporary horror film. This link between *Sisters* and the serial queens becomes more intriguing if we can explicitly link it up as a place where the anxieties of their respective women's liberation movements were generating.

While it is not at all unusual for a female detective to aid a female victim, this move, the shift from understanding Danielle as a monster to a victim tracks one of the subtle generic shifts that *Sisters* makes, from horror to melodrama. This shift recurs throughout the film. Who is the real monster? Danielle, Dominique or Dr. Emil Breton—husband, father, doctor? A female detective and a female "monster" is quite rare in both horror films and in detective films where usually the genders are counterposed, their difference overdetermined. However, investigators in the Adventurer mode are more likely to be linked with a female victim. Robin Wood writes,

If the monster is defined as that which threatens normality, it follows that the monster of *Sisters* is Grace as well as Danielle/Dominique—a point the film acknowledges in the climactic hallucination/flashback sequence wherein Grace becomes Dominique, joined to Danielle as her Siamese Twin, the film's privileged moment on which its entire structure hinges. Simply, one can define the monster of *Sisters* as women's liberation; adding only that the film follows the time-honored horror film tradition of making the monster emerge as the most sympathetic character and its emotional center.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Singer, *Melodrama*, 222.

<sup>20</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan—And Beyond*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 134.

In *Sisters*, the monsters become conflated. Grace with her unnatural look becomes one of the “monstrous,” murderous, unnatural sisters.

Grace, demonstrating her strong investigative skills, follows Danielle and Breton to the psychiatric clinic. As she attempts to share her knowledge, she is discovered and made mad as if craziness is catching.<sup>21</sup> She tries use the phone to call the police and her editor, but is thwarted by a psychotic clinic resident. Grace attempts to use her status as reporter, but is instead berated by an inmate and then found by one of the doctors in charge. When he calls in Breton who, in a staggering bit of authoritative sleight of hand, tells his colleague that Grace is really Margaret and an inmate herself. Grace has no recourse. She cannot deny or fight or assert herself without seeming to confirm Breton’s diagnosis. And that easily, she is swept up and locked into a room, where no one will come to her aid because she has been deemed hysterical by a man. This is the humiliation of humiliations. She is smart and gutsy and correct and none of it matters because she is a woman and thus subject to men’s definitions. What follows is a scene almost as strange and excessive as the split screen sequence.

Grace is drugged and put in the bed next to Danielle, a literal stand-in for the murdered Dominique. We are shown a flickering, self-consciously filmic black and white scene where Grace *is* Dominique the bad sister, the bad object (psychoanalytically), conjoined to Danielle. Dr. Breton narrates the process of separation in murmurs. The sequence walks the line between dream and document. It is a surrealistic nightmare. But whose dream is less clear. Indeed this scene is unattributable, split again, this time between Grace’s nightmare, Breton’s interpretation, and a sort

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21 Again, we are reminded of Dresner’s claim that all female investigators on film are figured as crazy, even as she does not mention this film specifically.

of document of what “really” happened. Asking questions about self-determination and culpability, the film proposes that Danielle is not responsible for her actions. Instead she is a victim of the nefarious Dr. Breton, as witnessed by his obsessive looking, his efficient stage management and cleanup of the crime scene, the fact that he is responsible both morally and actually for the division between Dominique and Danielle (his desire to have sex with Danielle led to his performing the separation surgery and Dominique’s subsequent death) and in a rather tautological sense, the fact that he becomes the focus of Grace’s investigation.

However, it is Danielle who remains the focal point of the dream sequence. Her psychosis and trauma make her active. Grace, on the other hand is a drugged and passive witness rather than an active participant. Her drugged states allows only a passive watching rather than an active watching as the end of the mystery unfolds Her autonomy and her potential for action are cut away by the narrative. While her investigation ultimately leads her to the correct place, she does not realize it, nor is she in a position to set the world to rights. Her desire to investigate turns her into a monster. There are repercussions to doing things because you want to. Grace has fallen victim to the doctor. He had the great foresight to implant a hypnotic suggestion in Grace so that she remembers nothing about what has happened.

As happens in many detective films, the original crime is almost forgotten in the heat of the investigation. This story frequently shifts from attempting to get some sort of justice for the murdered man, but simply figuring out what happened, which is a much more complex issue. Intriguingly, the question remains, “Who killed him?” Even though we saw the murder in even more detail than Grace could, it remains our question, as an audience. Or perhaps to more finely tune our question, the film asks: Who is responsible for his death? But with that question comes a multiplicity of others. Most vividly, “What’s the deal with Danielle?” That, at least, is a question

that the film answers. Finally this film is about the futility of investigation. Not only does Grace end up infantilized, tucked back into her childhood bed with no remembrance of the things that she has come to know, but our last sight of the man she has enlisted to help her is of him watching a couch (the couch) that no one will claim, abandoned at the train station.

A melancholy ending is not unusual in the detective genre. Frequently, there is the feeling at the end of the story that we solved this one, but what's really changed? What's the point? There will always be another crime. This feeling comes from a darker strain of detective stories than the Adventurer usually draws from (See *The Avenger*). But this is made over-the-top in *Sisters*. Grace has successfully figured out the crime and its motivations. She has heard the confession. She has witnessed the crime. But she is literally unable in the end to do anything about it. It is erased from her memory, as if it never happened. Just as assertively as she investigated, she insists that she knows nothing about it, tucked up in her childhood bed. The police in the film are, as ever, belated. It puts us as spectators in a very vulnerable position. We have watched her as she follows the clues, watched it play out, only to have our entire experience denied at the 25<sup>th</sup> hour. How else are we supposed to judge Grace's success except through the ways she is represented?<sup>22</sup>

The split screen sequence demonstrates the way in which a film that focuses on an investigating woman continually puts the focus on the fact of looking. Not only do we see the

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<sup>22</sup> See also Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996). Williams see *Sisters* as using "the genre's potential to express cinematic reaction against patriarchal oppression" but does the paradoxes inherent in the film (157). He proposes that De Palma reworks horror's "premise of woman as monster" (159) with Danielle instead a victim of patriarchal oppression. And Grace too suffers from this: "Viewing a brutal murder from her apartment, Grace fails to persuade mother and the law (official law enforcement officers and overbearing private detective Charles Durning) of the validity of her independent vision." (159). Of course we the audience did see what she saw and know it to be true.

murder happening, but we watch Grace, our investigator, see it happen. Even though it is her vision that motivated the action, we have to watch her watch the violence, thus creating a scopophilic loop. This seems a natural direction for de Palma and his recurrent fascination with looking/scopophilia. But throughout the rest of the series of films it is almost always a man who looks (*Body Double*, etc.). Because even at the moment of the film's production, there was something not "natural" about this kind of looking; a woman investigating a crime calls attention to the fact of looking in a way that a male investigative look does not. The male look is naturalized. This is the central tenet of feminist film theory. *Sisters* illustrates and parodies and makes as its subject the cinematic feminist dilemma at the heart of investigating women: the subject/object problem. Everything is about looking, both in terms of the visual field and the narrative, about the pleasures and dangers of looking. My question, following a generation of feminist film critics, becomes, "Who looks, and why?"

Mulvey makes a claim for the necessary passivity of the object of the gaze, trapped like a fly in amber for the patriarchal pleasure of the voyeur. And film theory has spent a long time pushing and opening up this provocation. What happens when the woman is not passive, instead an observer and person of action in her own right? This is precisely the question that Tania Modleski turns in her essay on *Rear Window*, especially compelling as it was one of the examples that Mulvey used to illustrate the way the gaze works.<sup>23</sup> Intriguingly the dynamic described by Mulvey is explicitly reversed in *Sisters*. Grace watches the detective Larch, the private detective, search the apartment across the way. Throughout the film, we see Grace looking, her gaze

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<sup>23</sup> Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005).

frequently framed by a window or through binoculars, or a video tape framed by the screen. This repeated and elaborate framing continually draws attention to the fact of her gaze. Ironically, the more active she becomes, the more time we spend looking at her. Only when she becomes fully passive and drugged do we get access to her point of view.

While the titular sisters tend to get all of the critical attention<sup>24</sup>, no one can deny the investigative Grace Collier's centrality to the plot of *Sisters* even to the extent that she "becomes" a sister at the end. Her drugged nightmare figures her as the "bad" sister Dominique. The Danielle and Grace are clearly set up as opposing doubles even without the link of the split screen. Despite the apparent and generic differences between Grace and Nancy Drew, they are still figured, and function, in the same way. I would argue that these cross-generic similarities point to the strength of the figure of the Adventurer. Grace is an Adventurer even though *Sisters* does not function like an adventure movie.

## 2.4 FARGO'S BEATING HEART

The Coen Brothers' 1996 film, *Fargo* is wildly different in tone and mood from either *Nancy Drew* or *Sisters*. Although William Luhr claims that *Fargo* "is distinctive in the Coen's career for its

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, in Barbara Creed's discussion of *Sisters* in "Dark Desires: Male Masochism in Horror Movies" in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in American Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 2012), there is not even a mention of Grace or her character, as if Danielle/Dominique were the only element of the plot line. Even when she brings up Linda Williams's essay, "When a Woman Looks," she neglects to mention anything about the woman looking in the film and her repercussions in terms of the film.

minimal evocation of genre films,” I would argue that it does indeed activate a whole set of generic expectations, but they are a different set than he is perhaps looking for.<sup>25</sup> The Coen Brothers have spent their career subverting and playing with genre expectations, and *Fargo* is not an exception.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, their smooth unfolding of detective story plot line featuring a woman detective works just like a detective story featuring a male detective. But this is wildly unusual in films in which an investigating woman appears. By making the detective story unfold straight, they have subverted it more than anyone can see. While one could certainly argue that the Coen Brothers’ films as a whole resist easy generic categories, they do *use* generic markers and are clearly fully aware of them. I would argue that one of the ways in which they disrupt the generic markers is through using a female detective. The fact that she both resists certain clichés of the figure does not prevent her from fitting quite well in what might be thought of as an unexpected modality.

On the surface, Brainerd’s Chief of Police Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) does not seem to have a great deal in common with Nancy Drew or Grace Collier, but when we view them through the lens of the Adventurer, we can see them operating according to the same rules. Most Adventurers are not professional investigators, as we have seen. Both Nancy Drew and Grace in *Sisters* are decidedly amateurs. They do not make their living solving crimes as Marge does. Marge is a professional investigator: she is the police chief of Brainerd. She has a mastery that is denied the other two characters and as a result does not in her investigation create the same generic difficulties. She becomes not just the heart, but the most compelling character of the film. While

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<sup>25</sup> William Luhr, “Introduction” *The Coen Brothers’ Fargo*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>26</sup> See Paul Coughlin’s essay on the Coen Brothers work from May 22, 2003 in *Senses of Cinema* Great Director series. “Joel and Ethan Coen, ”  
<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/coens/>



it might seem that Marge has more in common with the Avengers of the next Chapter, there are very clear ways that she is an Adventurer. While Marge is a very richly detailed character, she does not hide a deep dark secret; she is not compelled into this life. She, like Nancy and Grace, investigates because she wants to.

Phillipa Gates sees Marge as “the exception rather than the rule” of female investigators, in that she offers “a potentially transgressive disruption of assumed sex roles” within the context of a cycle of female detective comedies including *Charlie’s Angels* (McG, 2000), *Miss Congeniality* (Petrie, 2000), and *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001).<sup>27</sup> However if we consider Marge within the context of the Adventurer, suddenly she doesn’t seem like such an exception. She both proposes and resists a certain disruption of sexual roles. Like the Coen Brothers’ more recent film *No Country for Old Men* (2009), *Fargo* involves a triadic story between a regular (but not innocent) man who commits a crime and sets the action in motion, a criminal element that is involved in the crime, and the face of Law and Order that pursues the whole bunch. In *No Country*, that face is the grizzled and exhausted Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones); in *Fargo* it is the pregnant and stalwart Marge Gunderson. Indeed, she has become one of the most recognizable of female detectives in the modern moment. Marge’s gender and pregnancy are just intriguing character traits like Tommy Lee Jones’ hard worn visage and crankiness. Her femaleness is not ignored (indeed it is highlighted by her extreme pregnancy and by portrayals of her marriage and her encounter with an old school acquaintance), but it is not at issue or under explicit interrogation. It is however, most certainly figured as different from everyone else in the film. Marge is singular.

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<sup>27</sup> Gates, *Detecting Women*, 289.

Because the story is split three ways, Marge is not the sole protagonist. But she is the only character who is successful. Everyone else is a series of failures. She does not change. But then again, neither does any one else. One does not get the sense that change is even possible in the wide expanses of North Dakota's snowy plains. The Coen brothers refer to her as the "heroine" even though they "took the liberty of not introducing [her] until the middle of the movie."<sup>28</sup> Marge gets relatively little screen time, but remains the moral center of the film and carries many of the most visually striking moments of the film. In addition, the film ends with her and her husband Norm cozy in bed celebrating his painting getting on a three-cent postage stamp and the gentle anticipation of the baby in two months.

It's 36 minutes into the film until we meet Marge; we will see this delay repeated in other modalities.<sup>29</sup> However, here, rather than the delay building anticipation to a sexualized fever pitch a la the arrival of Mae West or a femme fatale (see *The Avenger*), we are not given any clue or foreshadowing of her existence. On the contrary, the scene of her introduction seems designed to cool any built up tension. The scene in fact marks an abrupt shift visually and emotionally from the previous violent and absurd scenes of killings in the snow. It is warm and still and comforting. A couple is bundled in nightclothes and covers in bed and the woman answers the phone. We do not hear what the call is, all we know is that it is enough to get her out of bed. The moment offers us access into Marge's comfortable life with her husband Norm.

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28 Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret, "Closer to the Life Than the Conventions of the Cinema: Interview with the Coen Brothers (conducted in Cannes on May 16, 1996)" in Luhr, 110.

<sup>29</sup> In this she resembles Lila, Marion Crane's investigative sister in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) as well.

In the bleak white landscape of the crime scene, Marge's lumbering brown-clad figure is a warm and solid presence, a physical instantiation of her down-to-earth-ness. But it is also not an overtly feminized presence (all sexual markers being disguised by her bulky cold-weather uniform). Throughout the film, Marge is not "sexy" in attitude either. As she examines the crime scene, she exudes competence and confidence as she narrates her findings to her partner. And because we have just seen the crime itself, we know she is correct. Intriguingly, rather than undercutting our confidence in her (because we've seen the crime occur, we do not *need* to trust her), it fully solidifies our faith in her rather amazing abilities. When she pauses, bent at the waist with her hands on her knees, her partner asks if she is all right. She says, "I think I'm gonna barf." But this passes quickly. This intrusion of femaleness (pregnancy) is jarring. The collision of competence and femaleness makes for humor. Overcoming this moment of debilitating femininity makes her appear even more competent.

Her pregnancy marks her as in-between. This might seem contradictory, as being pregnant is the most womanly thing a person can do. However, pregnancy also evacuates her sexuality. She has no boss to put her down. She is clearly in charge and smarter than all her colleagues. Her interrogations are all clearly under her control. Her interrogation techniques seem quite straightforward. But she certainly isn't above the subtle threat. But from here just comes from the clear and tidy unfolding of facts. She does not put up with any guff. Or rather, she'll let him flail away but when he raises his voice her face stills and her eyes go cold and suddenly she seems fully invested in her power, a power she deflects in a thousand ways. She does not lord it over others, or use her femininity in any way, except to occupy space and let herself sit. Her pregnancy clearly marks her as female, but simultaneously erases her sexuality. She is not a sexual threat, thus she is not an ideological threat at all. This allows for smooth generic running. While her work is free

from humiliations, her life is not as we will see in her encounter with her old school friend that serves a similar purpose to the professional humiliations we saw in the other films.

Marge's very awkward meeting with her former classmate, and the subsequent revelation that he was lying to her, add a peculiar element to our trust in her. And indeed, disrupts the running of the movie. The encounter begins with another midnight call. The parallel is clear between this phone call and the first that calls her to the crime scene. Luhr sees Mike "in the company of the desperate and posturing failures" that populate the film and the scene as registering Marge's competence in dealing with them.<sup>30</sup> This would seem to set up a parallel between the crime scene and meeting Mike in the Radisson.

It is a scene that has not been very well accounted for, or at least remains highly contested, in the burgeoning literature around *Fargo*. Even Jans Wager's insightful reading of the film as a *noir* neglects to fully explain the episode with Mike.<sup>31</sup> The episode with Mike seems as gratuitous as a musical number or a sex scene in terms of the plot and can tell us as much about the priorities of the film. Wager is interested in the scene in terms of race and the Coen brothers claim it was part of an experiment with naturalism: "Our intention was to show the story had a relationship to life rather than to fiction, setting us free to create a scene that had no relationship to the plot."<sup>32</sup> Doherty writes that it was "not a red herring, just a moment in time, underscoring Marge's fidelity to husband and friends and the weirdness of everyday life, homicides aside."<sup>33</sup> But this all seems

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<sup>30</sup> Luhr, "Fargo: Far Removed from the Stereotypes of...", 98.

<sup>31</sup> Jans B. Wager. *Dames in the Driver's Seat: Rereading Film Noir*. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Ciment and Niogret, "Closer to Life," 112.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Doherty, "Review of Fargo," in *The Coen Brothers' Fargo*, 139. Originally in *Cineaste*, Vol22. No. 2, 1996.

to ignore the way it actually works within the film and the way in which it activates a certain pattern of desexualization and humiliation that we have come to see in the Adventurer. It is one of the few scenes in the film that do not serve to advance the plot. It is a side avenue. What then is its function?

In her encounter with Mike she is constantly displacing his interest in her. From the initial too-long hug, to brushing off his interest in the homicide, “But there’s not a heck of a lot to discuss.” When his interest begins to trespass on the physical, “Do you mind if I sit over here?” as he slides in next to her on the bench at the restaurant, Marge easily responds, “No, I prefer that you sit over there. I’d prefer that.” She has no hesitation, although she does attempt to soften the blow, “No, no. Just so I can see you. I don’t have to turn my head.” He keeps her off balance. There is no distinction between her deflections from his physical interest and his interest in her work. She is equally quick and effective at diverting both. And finally he ends up just weeping at the table. While polite, she is firm. I agree with Luhr that there is a clear alignment between Mike and the other losers who populate the film, however, there is something more at stake in the encounter. While she clearly handles Mike adroitly, she does so using the tools of the female masquerade where she strips herself of her mastery both literally, this is the only time we see her in mufti, and through her verbal deflections.

She is concerned or curious enough to call a mutual friend to discuss her encounter with Mike. This phone call reinforces Margie’s femininity through orienting her in the feminine world of gossip and occurs while she is at the homely task of folding her clothes. With Margie, we hear through the phone a complete reversal of everything he has told her: Mike is out of work, has been institutionalized, still lives with his parents, and has inappropriately pursued another of their classmates (the woman in fact that he claimed had died of leukemia). The revelation serves to

make vivid her lack of mastery in the encounter. She did not seem to suspect Mike of lying to her during their drink. It is as if being so clearly oriented as female through her clothing and through Mike's outrageous flirting caused her to lose the mastery that comes with the uniform. This scene is a clear reversal of the thrust of the film where scenes of her personal or domestic life are inevitably interrupted by her police work.

The film ends with a return to that disrupted domesticity. In the final scene there is no mention of her success, only of Norm getting his painting on the three-cent stamps and the impending baby. This mirrors the deflection or the seeming masquerade that Marge performed at the Radisson. All mention of her job or her success is erased. While she is competent, her detective side is never fully integrated with her feminine side. The two remain separate. This perhaps accounts for her failure of imagination with Mike. In her street clothes, she is more distinctly feminine, if still resolutely un-sexualized in her awkward midwestern maternity polyester. Indeed, her lack of sexuality here (like the intrusion of femininity at the crime scene) is what powers the humor of the moment—the strange little man making an absurd move on the hugely pregnant woman.

It is her curiosity and her tenacity that lead to the significant breaks and solutions to the case. Her return to Jerry's auto dealership to pursue some questions is what leads him to fleeing, an admission of guilt. In this way, we can see the interview not as a mistake (although she did seem startled by his move), but as a terrific success. She followed her instinct about the case and it led to results. And most dramatically, after her visit to Minneapolis she drives around the lake where the killer might be, to see what she can see. And her instincts pay off. She finds the tan Ciara that has been the subject of so much interest, and in locating it, finds, shoots and apprehends our killer.

While she does not get as much screen time as the other characters in the film, she does anchor them. After finding her killer and bringing him down, Marge speaks to the vicious Gaear Grimsrud in the back of her cruiser. She marks the loss of five people for “a little bit of money.” She reflects, “I just don’t understand it.” And this is what viewing the female investigator through the lens of the Adventurer allows us to see. She wants to understand, she is curious, but there is something in her that is fundamentally different from the criminal. Her failures (although minor) are all rooted in the fact that she expects the best from people. She does not expect Mike to lie to her; she does not expect Jerry Lundegard to flee. Marge deals with what is in front of her. She does not expect duplicity because there is not logic to it. Marge’s calm intelligence allows for clear vision of the facts but does not seem to encompass the fevered imaginations of the criminal element around her. She never even seems to guess at his kidnapping con that set the whole mess in motion, because why would someone hire two idiots to kidnap their own wife?

The classical detective is set apart from the criminal; it is not because the motivations that are revealed are incomprehensible, but rather, that acting on them shows a weakness of character. But to Marge, and indeed, Nancy and Grace, it just does not make sense. It is something foreign, something different. Perhaps this lack of understanding is because of the inherent difference marked by their femaleness. This seems to speak to classic patriarchal lines of defense against the intrusion of females into the male domains of crime. Because of some inherent purity, good women would never understand it. But remarkably, these films show that their lack of understanding is really an aid to their drive to restore what is right in the world. It is their sensor. It not at all that they cannot figure out *what* happened, but they will never truly understand *why*. This also has recourse to the traditional moral center of melodrama, with the woman, ideally the mother or virgin, (and the pregnant but non-sexual Marge evokes both with the visual references to the Pieta

and the Virgin Mary) occupying the moral center, both is the embodiment and motivator of all that is good in the world.

*Fargo* is not, however, a mystery. There is no mystery. As with *Sisters*, the audience sees the series of crimes unfold, and then Marge comes along afterwards and reconstructs it. She is “too late.” Adventurers are imbued with a clear sense of the way the world should work and put all of their considerable energies into correcting it when it goes out of whack. As in *Nancy Drew: Detective*, the core crime is a kidnapping. And more so, a kidnapping of a woman for money. But unlike Nancy, Marge does not solve that crime. While the investigation is happening, she is not even aware that that crime, the core crime has even occurred. But like the later entries in the *Nancy Drew* series, the subsequent murders are treated as the signs of the central crime. Indeed, they are the direct result of the central crime. This central crime’s solution is never clearly unraveled. The narrative gap around the crime is a puzzle. We could consider it a victim of elaborate plotting like the apocryphal story from *The Big Sleep* where no one, not even the author, could remember who killed the chauffeur. And indeed while the film is unfolding we do not notice the lack. At the end of the film, we see the cops pick up Jerry Lundegard who had fled to a sleazy motel. Marge is not there. Instead we see her tucked up cozy in bed celebrating Norm’s success and their new family. I think we must understand it as another way of obviating the tension the investing woman creates.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

The genre in which an investigating woman appears is never stable. Her gender is the cause and the center of that instability. Each modality offers a way to organize the instability she creates, a



way to recognize patterns, a way to link characters and films that do not seem easily joined in way that sheds light upon each. Nancy Drew, Grace Collier, Marge Gunderson: they are not an easily matched set. Yet the characteristics that tie them together, both personally and the films in which they exist, operate in a recognizable fashion. While they come from different backgrounds, locations, time periods, are different ages, hold different jobs and exist within different apparent genres, the figure of the Adventurer serves to illuminate the way in which they function. Thinking about the three characters through the same lens allows us to see something unique about female investigators in general. And the figure of the Adventurer is not the only lens through which to view them. The sheer diversity of the films, however, proves the strength of the figure and closer investigation into the way they function within the films and each films recourse to other generic elements shows the rather astonishing power and resilience of the figure: in a children's serial, in a horror film, or in crime film. Curiosity, the denial of feminine sexuality, intelligence and ability through jokes and humiliations, and particular patterns of genre switching help negotiate the ideological challenges that a detective's mastery creates in female iterations.

### 3.0 THE AVENGER—I AM COMPELLED

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine women investigators in the Avenger mode. Here, the woman detective seeks to right a wrong, is on the side of justice, if not always the law. The narrative is sharply focused on the crime under investigation, without many of the subplots that are frequently seen in the other modes. The Avenger tends to align most closely to what are generally thought of as detective films, or procedurals.<sup>1</sup> Following the narrative of a detective story, films in this mode usually start with the crime and then work their way to a solution.

The detective genre is one of mastery. However, the female investigator disrupts the clarity of the detective genre and films featuring her shift, combine, and transform genres. We will see how the Avenger shifts through the detective movie, the thriller, horror, rape revenge, *noir*, and melodrama. This generic complication is a result and a symptom of the narrative discomfort she creates.

More than in any other modality, the Avenger operates, at least initially, as a legitimate representative of the law, that is, she is a cop, an investigator for the FBI, an analyst for the CIA. However this positioning is not stable: the Avenger has a particularly fraught relationship with the

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Leitch, *Crime Films* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

patriarchal order. The detective is an agent of the Law, both literally and in Lacanian terms, even if he is a private detective working alone, rather than a cop or other type of government agent.<sup>2</sup> If the female investigator is most recognizable *as* detective in this mode, often explicitly named and understood as a legitimate investigator, both structurally within the film and by the power structures within the diegesis, she is never an unproblematic one. The alliance between a woman and the Law is an uneasy one at best. The Law, according to Lacan, denies subjecthood to women, thus they are inherently outside of the Law, which upholds patriarchal order. Women in this context are objects, to be traded or protected, chattel before the Law.

A woman in active service to this Law already exhibits a kind of divided self. The fact that female investigators actively pursue the Law seems to undo its own basic tenets. The basic structure of Hollywood narrative cinema is highly dependent in the same structures as the Law. Narratives that feature such a complicating figure who by her presences serves to, if not actively subvert the Law (she is after all upholding it), at least strain its boundaries, disrupt smooth ideological workings. This inherent conflict that runs through the Avenger mode is worked out on the level of genre. The ideological strain of the investigating woman has narrative and generic consequences. She cannot be wholly absorbed into the generic structures to which she seems to belong, thus strange bulges and weaknesses make themselves felt.

The female investigator is untenable as an agent of the Law, thus the film takes on other

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<sup>2</sup> Even in its *noir*-ish incarnations, where the detectives are too weak to complete their job, the problem is still solved. The answer is clear. Not surprisingly later *noirs*, darker *noirs*, tend to do away with the detective altogether, despite his iconic status. If there is an investigative figure, the trouble he's in is his own, like Edmund O'Brien in *D.O.A.* (Mate, 1950) using his last hours of life to try to figure out who poisoned him, an ambivalent mission at best.

genres to deal with the strain. The Avenger mode is never “purely” a detective film, but rather cycles through several genres, often at the expense of narrative sense and cohesion. Empowering a women undercuts the strength and psychological force of the detective genre, at the level of genre.

The Avenger mode is deeply imbricated in horror, the rape-revenge cycle, *film noir*, and the thriller. I realize the ambiguity and difficulty of these generic terms, both theoretically and affectively. These terms themselves are not stable, nor are they all the same *type* of generic category; rather they address different frames of reference. As the films in which the Avenger operates shift their generic focus, so too does the figure herself. If the film changes into something other than a detective film, the protagonist becomes something other than an investigator. Her narrative function transforms. The films, themselves, question whether she is the monster or the victim, the hunter or the hunted. The genre switching serves to break her authority. By switching genres, the narrative undermines, or even evacuates, her authority. But, I would argue, its excess offers its own kinds of pleasures.

While gender is frequently under investigation throughout the modes explored in this dissertation, Avengers investigate the constructedness of gender performance itself, as well as enacting it. The female investigator, simply by her presence, questions the position and mastery of masculinity. Her arrival signals a male failure somewhere, as this is a male narrative position. Thus, it is not surprising that she frequently takes on cases that lead to an investigation of masculinity itself. The crimes she investigates tend to be crimes against women (or children) and are frequently lingered over within the diegesis—often quite sadistically. Rape, more than murder, is the crime that the Avenger is investigating and is simultaneously threatened with. When the narrative proposes a death threat, it too is highly sexualized. In this way, the entire context of the

Avenger is circumscribed within the “feminine.” The Avenger herself, however, tends to be masculinized and highly effective.

If curiosity was the defining characteristic of the Adventurer, compulsion is the sign of the Avenger. Avengers are always compelled: compelled by the past, by some interior quirk or some violence they were subject to. Compulsion connotes a loss of agency, of being moved by something beyond oneself. Investigation, however, requires agency. It inevitably involves choices, looking, and intellectual synthesis. On the very level of motivation we already have a seemingly impossible tension. She burns with a desire that will not let her stop. Compulsion is the trauma at the level of character that the figure represents on the level of genre. As a figure, her compulsion undercuts her ability, or at least an audience’s faith in her ability, to successfully navigate and solve the crime.

While the women of the Avenger mode behave in the least feminine ways in traditional terms, they are *made* feminine through rape. It is not always an explicit case of a woman being punished for her lack of appropriate gender performance, although it certainly can be, but a way of flagging an essentialist view of women, even if visually and narratively offering alternatives. Those alternatives cannot go unchallenged within the narrative structures of Hollywood cinema. But the fact of challenges is fascinating; the form that those challenges take is revelatory.

The Avenger, perhaps because she is closer to her male counterpoint in this mode than any other, is a more contemporary phenomenon. While we can see examples, or at least hints, in early and classic cinema—*Traffic in Souls* (George Loane Tucker, 1913), *Night Nurse* (William Wellman, 1931), *Sunset Murder Case* (Louis Gasnier, 1938), *Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944)—she really only begins to accumulate iterations in the late 70s and 80s, and emerges with strength in the 90s and 2000s.

Because of its strong emphasis on the crime, films operating in the Avenger mode tend to follow similar narrative patterns as films featuring a male counter-part. However, the techniques of investigation and certain narrative complications are unique. Sometimes, for example, the crime to be avenged and solved is committed against themselves (often sexual), rarely the case for a male detective. This mode encompasses many traditional procedural texts featuring a woman detective as well as examples from the rape-revenge cycle of the 70s. The mood of this mode tends towards the serious and the crimes are often quite grim and vivid. In this mode there is often a rich exploration of the personal and social ramifications that the crime under investigation leaves in its wake.

In this chapter I will be reading *Taking Lives* (Caruso, 2004) as a way of teasing out the issues that the Avenger gives rise to in terms of genre, gender, star persona, and ideology. *Taking Lives* is a typical film in the Avenger mode, strongly exhibiting the themes and structures that we see repeated throughout the mode, while also the edges of those conventions. Like all genre films, the avenging mode is dynamic, recombining and changing. Examining *Taking Lives* lets us look backward into earlier examples and gives us a glimpse of very contemporary iterations that are being produced as we speak. But most importantly, *Taking Lives* makes explicit the underlying conflicts that the Avenger creates. I'd like to frame this chapter in a discussion of two Kathryn Bigelow films, *Blue Steel* (1989) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). *Blue Steel*, with Jonathan Demme's 1991 film *Silence of the Lambs*, is considered something of a foundational text for the female detective in film. And the two films in some ways bracket this mode. The Avenger is a fundamentally contemporary modality.

### 3.2 THE AVENGER AND THE SERIAL KILLER

*Taking Lives* is another one of those serial killer thrillers where the madman is not content with murder but must also devise an ingenious and diabolical pattern so that it can be intuited by an investigator who visits the crime scene and picks up his vibes. —Roger Ebert

In generic terms, what do we mean by “serial killer tales”? Or serial killer thriller? For Martin Rubin in his book on the topic, many types of films other than detective films fall under the rubric of the thriller, which “falls somewhere between a genre proper and a descriptive quality that is attached to other genres.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, he sees the films linked up under the term thriller as sharing syntactic or structural elements, but not the iconographic or semantic elements. Most importantly, films that belong to this category evoke a certain set of visceral emotional effects: “suspense, fright, mystery, exhilaration, excitement, speed, movement” and thrillers offer these affects in excess.<sup>4</sup>

Linda Ruth Williams in *The Erotic Thriller* notes that “in more recent serial killer tales such as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) or *Taking Lives*” the “investigative/pursued heroines (Neve Campbell and Angelina Jolie, respectively) are far more central than their objects/pursuers.”<sup>5</sup> While this insight is not critical to Williams argument, it is important to us here, as it seems to indicate a larger shift in the role women have within these kinds of stories. The oscillation, or duality, is more and more marked. Investigating women are more central than the monster that

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Rubin, *Thrillers (Genres in America Cinema)*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 4.

<sup>4</sup> Rubin, *Thrillers*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 133 n. 27.

they pursue/are pursued by. But do *Scream* and *Taking Lives* really belong to the same category? Williams sees the women investigator as central to the erotic thriller.<sup>6</sup> “Films like *Guilty as Sin* are more like thriller versions of Carol Clover’s ‘final girl’ horror films, driven by a central female protagonist who makes choices and outsmarts the dark and deadly male. The erotic thriller’s female investigative heroine is then a hybrid figure, part *noirish* detective woman, part horror final-girl, dominating the film’s primary point of view and eliciting sympathies appropriate to both hero and quester...[F]emale hero/*homme fatale* films align us with the stalked woman and either keep the killer male largely in the shadows, or make his threat play second fiddle to her fear, which quickly becomes fearless giant-killing ingenuity.”<sup>7</sup> What sets the investigators apart from women portrayed in horror is that the focus of the film is on them, but they are not purely monsters or victims. They oscillate between these positions at times. As we will see with these films’ emphasis on compulsion, this ambivalence points to the underlying conflict around a woman’s agency. She seems to see no difference between, or at least an elision between, the two positions. But she is doing genre making of her own. I see the naming of them as serial killer stories as problematic. While in terms of audience reception, I see that it sets up some very clear expectations: a thriller, a chase plot, clever, gory and ingenious plot points. But in terms of how they work structurally, films that follow the detective function differently than those that follow the killer. The person with whom we align our vision and our sympathy matters in terms of how we can understand a text. These alignments are fluid and can change even in the course of a single film, but there are repercussions to this move, sympathetically and generically.

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller*, 127-8.



Even if the crime isn't completed (certainly the serial killer tales attempt to have it both ways), the unsolved murder always leaves open the possibility that murder can happen again and it is a loop that must be closed in the detective story, a return to normalcy, the world where the rules apply. But in that in-between world a murderer opens up with his destruction of the illusion that rules can make us safe, the rules no longer hold. This allows a place for the woman investigator to come forward. Her rule breaking doesn't carry to same valence because *none* of the rules are working. When the world is returned to its axis through the solution of the crime, however, so too must the woman return to her place, these films want to tell us. But even if we are willing to believe that a woman has a place and it is not solving crimes, a woman's place looks quite different after she has done something like this. The frame of the ordinary world no longer holds.

For Phillipa Gates in her article "Manhunting: The Female Detective in the Serial Killer Film," "the serial killer films (an offshoot of the horror genre)" remains an uninterrogated structure.<sup>8</sup> Intriguingly, and tellingly, she calls these movies "serial killer films" when she is interested in the investigator. This seems yet another way of stripping the focus and agency from the figure to the killer that Gates is recognizing and bringing to the surface. Many of the Avenger films could be considered "Serial Killer" tales- especially the more contemporary iterations: *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), *Copycat* (Jon Amiel, 1995), *The Bone Collector* (Philip Noyce, 1999) *Murder by Numbers* (Barbet Schroeder, 2002) *Twisted* (Phillip Kaufman, 2004), *Mr. Brooks* (Bruce A. Evans, 2007), *Untraceable* (Gregory Hoblit, 2008). Certainly, *Blue Steel* is a classic example. We could even

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<sup>8</sup> Philippa Gates, "Manhunting: the female detective in the serial killer film." *Post Script*, Fall 2004 V 24.1.

consider *Zero Dark Thirty* a serial killer tale; they are trying to catch bin Laden before he strikes again. There is a darkness to the mode that makes this kind of crime especially potent (although, as we will see, this is not the only kind of crime the Avenger takes on. But calling them serial killer films puts the emphasis on the killer, not the investigator.

Is *Se7en* (David Fincher 1995), a film that features two male detectives, a serial killer tale? Sure, it is. But to again turn to Ebert, who, if for no other reason than sheer prolificness (and there certainly are other reasons), becomes a kind of bellwether. He writes of *Se7en*, “It tells the story of two detectives ... and their attempts to capture a perverted serial killer...”<sup>9</sup> That first paragraph’s emphasis is on the (male) detectives. They are the subjects. Maybe the shift in emphasis has to do with the ten years that follow, a proliferation of the kinds of stories that piled on after the success of *Se7en*, which we could see *Taking Lives* as an example. But the ways in which women are written, and understood within popular culture, means something. There is no doubt, in terms of story, in terms of emphasis, in terms of screen time, in terms of sheer screen charisma, that Angelina Jolie is the star of the film. She is the investigator. And yet the critical emphasis is on the killer.

But this points to another issue that the investigator, that the detective, in all incarnations, brings up. There is always a way in which the investigator is re-active, rather than active. The bones of the story are laid by the criminal. But there is a large difference between re-active and passive. Investigators are never passive. They poke, they pry, they look, they put together. They search for truth and find it. But the way Ebert framed *Taking Lives* above takes away that agency.

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Ebert, 8/22/1995.

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19950922/REVIEWS/509220305/1023>

Instead investigators are simply following, taking part in the elaborate schemes of the killer. While the trope that the killer really wants to be found, to be rescued from his only evilness is prevalent in detective films, they come to the surface more strongly when the woman is the investigator, leaving the questions of what would have happened if he didn't want to be found, didn't want to be stopped, open and unanswered. The implication, however, is that if he really wanted to get away with it all, a woman would never have caught him.

The generic construct of the film (the detective film is the most logical and action oriented of genre) proceeds through a series of actions and reactions that must be carefully ordered. It is the compulsion of the killer (the object of the investigation and thus already upsetting gender roles) that must be contained and the order of the world restored. This is the primary pleasure of the detective story. Chaos is contained. But when the investigator shares traits with the killer (as indeed is often the case, the only distinction a bit of moral high ground) the orderly unfolding is threatened. This, at its heart, is the impulse of *noir*.

In addition to the detective thriller and the serial killer tale, the *Avenger*, and *Taking Lives* in particular is deeply linked to the rape-revenge cycle of the 1970s, films like *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978), *Ms 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981). This is one of the ways in which the crime-solving woman connects with the victim/heroes of rape-revenge films. In that case, however, there is no mystery to solve. Those women tend to know exactly who raped them. The juice of the narrative force comes, rather, from the uncertainty of whether they will get their revenge, not on who deserves their vengeance.

A rape in the *Avenger's* past is the equivalent of the murder of his wife in the male's. It as a synecdoche for the pain of the detective's past and serves as the impetus for a detective to move from the average to the superlative. While the *Avenger* is technically within the rights of the law,

the fierceness of her thirst for revenge is Jacobean. She will stop at nothing. In a film featuring a male detective like *Lethal Weapon*, the memory of the woman fades, leaving the crazy intensity and perhaps washing up a new love interest. The memory of rape never does. Every love interest for the Avenger carries not just a potential disappointment or loss, but the immediate threat of emotional and bodily harm. No wonder these women are prickly and resist the advances of would-be lovers. But for this resistance they are painted as unfeminine, unlikeable, or irreversibly damaged.

The equivalency of rape and a murdered wife that this proposes is complicated, to say the least. There is the very real difference between something that happens to you, and something that happens to someone you love. There is the shared assumption that whatever wrong there is must be perpetrated upon a woman, that her body is the site of the proper kind of victimhood that propels the ordinary into the noble. There is also the idea that somehow death equals rape. Or that rape equals death. On the one hand this seems to acknowledge the violence and horror of rape, but at the same time it seems to value a woman's virtue over her life. And of course there is the issue of consent and compulsion.

But more than just a direct historical connection, there is a connection between the way the rape-revenge works through cinema and the female investigator. Read in *The New Avengers* writes, "...rape-revenge is best understood not as a genre, but as a narrative structure, which has been mapped on to and across not only a whole range of genres, but a whole range of historical and discursive contexts."<sup>10</sup> This in some ways mirrors my approach in this study. I am not necessarily

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<sup>10</sup> Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 25.

speaking just of a narrative structure, although that is surely a part of it. But rather a series of tropes—narrative, visual, meta—that we see across things. I would say that a narrative structure is the most fundamental aspect of a genre. That is, one cannot wander too far from the generic storyline and still maintain its membership into the group. Even here, it is still a detective investigating a crime that happens over and over.

### **3.3 BLUE STEEL: “I WANTED TO WATCH YOU HANDLE IT.”**

Like many of the films in this project, *Blue Steel* was not much a commercial success.<sup>11</sup> And at the time it was not much of a critical one.<sup>12</sup> But it is a vital link in the genealogy and taxonomy of the investigating woman and she is an Avenger. Looking at this film, we will sketch out the contour of the Avenger before we fully develop the modality in *Taking Lives*.

Over the course of her work, I would argue that Kathryn Bigelow is uninterested in the feminine, in exploring what it means. Bigelow is far more interested in issues around masculinity, even in her films with a female protagonist. In some ways we can see her as occupying an

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<sup>11</sup> According to the Internet Movie Database, it grossed just 8.2 million in the US.  
[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099160/business?ref\\_=tt\\_ql\\_dt\\_4](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099160/business?ref_=tt_ql_dt_4)[http://www.imdb.com/ti](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099160/business?ref_=tt_ql_dt_4)

<sup>12</sup> See for example Sheila Benson and Jack Smith’s scathing review in the *LA Times*, “*Blue Steel*: A Low-Caliber Bloody Thriller,” (March 16, 1990). [http://articles.latimes.com/1990-03-16/entertainment/ca-120\\_1\\_blue-steel](http://articles.latimes.com/1990-03-16/entertainment/ca-120_1_blue-steel). “[L]ofty, implausible, twaddle that sinks whatever ideas Bigelow was hoping to investigate.” This is particularly interesting as the reviewers can sense that Bigelow is not particularly interested in the things thrillers generally are invested in, but can’t quite figure out what she is thinking about, and so reject it as a failure.

uncomfortable middle ground from Susan Sontag, who acted as teacher and mentor to her, and James Cameron, king of the world, or at least king of a certain type of action Hollywood product. This way of using femininity as a foil for thinking about the masculine is a typical maneuver and one we see replayed throughout films in the Avenger mode. But it is distinctive. This is the only modality where this consistently happens. And it has to do with genre. In her article on Bigelow's action movies, Christina Lane writes that, "whereas traditional genre films try to solve the problem of "women," *Near Dark* (and in turn *Blue Steel*) attempts to solve women's problems. Therefore, generic formulas not only are being revised but are being exploited to solve "new" problems (of ideology) not ordinarily posed in conventional genres."<sup>13</sup> I'm not sure I agree with Lane that *Blue Steel* in any way tries to solve women's problems, I do agree that the "new" problems get posed through the transformation and combination of generic codes.

The genres that films featuring the Avenger spill over into are genres consistently understood as masculine (except, perhaps, the Rape/Revenge cycle). Rather than transitioning into a more feminized genre as we see in the other modes as an attempt to recoup and re-bind the feminine into ideologically more comfortable terrain, the Avenger reaches from the detective narrative to other masculine narratives. This is also a reason why the Avenger seems to operate more like a conventional detective. There is not the same inherent generic conflict that we see in the more modes. But there is still always a generic excess.

The opening of *Blue Steel* is instructive. The film opens with the clear sound of an escalating domestic dispute as the opening credits flash on a black screen. The image fades in as a

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<sup>13</sup> Christina Lane, "The Loveless to Point Break : Kathryn Bigelow's Trajectory in Action." *Cinema Journal*, Vol 37, No. 4 Summer 1998, 69.

handheld camera seems to walk up an apartment hallway. An image of a uniformed officer walks up the hallway beside the camera and gets a bit ahead. We see the officer kick open the door. Jamie Lee Curtis confronts the couple, shoots the husband but is shot in turn by the woman. “Shit.” Officers with clipboards come from the back room. It was just a test. “You shot the husband but the wife shot you. In the field, Turner, you’ve got to have eyes in the back of your head.” Then we get a return to the credits over slow-motion close-ups of highly fetishized images of a gun, and then the image of hands buttoning a uniform over a clearly female form in lacy underthings.

From these opening moments where the camera functions in ways that we can now identify as typically Bigelow, there is a sort of elision between the POV of the camera and our main character. The two come together and separate throughout the film, but the move gives a distinct affective alignment with our female protagonist. And here is perhaps where Bigelow is most radical; she disrupts the inevitability of the masculine point of view being the guiding orientation. But it is difficult to maintain. In the opening minutes, we also have feminine failure, the eroticized phallic symbol (which does become something of a running gag throughout the film) and sexualized female body that we are never allowed to forget underneath the uniform. All of the film’s thematics and the groundwork for the figuration of the Avenger are laid out in the first three minutes.

Like Angelina Jolie, Jamie Lee Curtis has a distinctly womanly body, but it is also not difficult to believe in her anger and her strength and her capability of killing. It is offset by her short butch haircut and by her uniform. Her desire to do these things from within the film are constantly questioned and undermined. She is asked on no less than four separate occasions why she wants to be a cop. “Cop-ness” is also understood in the film to stand in direct conflict with desirable womanhood. Megan plays with the assumption in her responses. Early in the film, when

a obviously frightened would be suitor asks her, she responds, that she likes to bang people's heads into walls. Out on her first patrol, her partner asks her "How come, Turner?" "Ever since I was a kid. I wanted to shoot people." Only her would-be suitor does not seem to find her cop-ness and womanhood incompatible. Indeed, it is the very combination that he finds erotic. This, however, is another problem. Her alignment with the villain undermines her. Not just the fact that she fell for him, which can be considered a feminine weakness, but the fact *that he fell for her*. This shows that there is something fundamentally not right with her.

Several story structures collide in *Blue Steel*. On one hand, it is something of a coming of age story about Megan Turner's growing into cop-ness. On the other hand, it about Megan's search for love. But then there is the inciting incident that pushes it in to serial killer territory and that the feeling that dominates. A bullet shows up in a dead body that literally has her name etched into it. She is pulled in by Internal Affairs, and she is drawn into the center of the investigation, even given a detective badge – she had been put on leave after the initial shooting death at the grocery store holdup. On her first day. But her rise in stature, even just in name, comes with additional pressure on her personal life. There is no privacy.

Megan's personal life, and thus the particular way she is figured and understands herself as a woman, then becomes the object of the investigation for the male characters in the film. From her mentor/love interest Nick Mann (!) played with appealing shagginess by Clancy Brown, to the rest of the force to whom she represents a problem on several levels to her other love interest/rapist/serial killer Eugene (Ron Silver) to her wife abusing father (Phillip Bosco), all of them use her femininity as something to define themselves against.

Once Eugene is introduced, he pulls narrative point of view, one that until we meet him has been closely aligned with Megan. We will see this shift occur with Costas in *Taking Lives* and



the combat narrative in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Kevin Ferguson in his article “Yuppie Devil: Villainy in Kathryn Bigelow’s *Blue Steel*,” vividly draws the line through the entangling gazes and phallic symbols circulate throughout the film and the way these readings create an enormous narrative weight on Megan Turner and create meanings that make her monstrous in the end.<sup>14</sup> While he compellingly argues that it is only through paying attention to Eugene Hunt, the yuppie devil that we can understand Megan. I would argue with him that the film offers Eugene an attention that is different from many others that we will see here, but links him vividly with Costas in *Taking Lives*, who as he is figured, is definitely a yuppie, if a bit out of time. He is an art dealer, his office even resembles the office in *30something* making the yuppie link complete. And why the yuppie? The yuppie is already demasculinized, thus making the fight less jarring.

In the opening sequence Megan knew more than we did. She knew that it was an exercise. With the central investigation, we know more than she does. In fact, everyone knows more than she does: the audience, Eugene, and even the other cops. The cops are convinced she knows something she doesn’t even know she knows. That is, they have no faith in her ability to distinguish what is important, what constitutes a clue from the rest of the clutter of her life. They seem to feel if they could just extract the knowledge that she doesn’t realize she has, that they might be able to do something else with it. To be able to extract the critical information from the jumble of the world is what a detective does. This move extinguishes our trust in her mastery; there is no faith in her ability.

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin L. Ferguson, “Yuppie Devil: Villainy in Kathryn Bigelow’s *Blue Steel*,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 50, Spring 2008.

Megan Turner is doubly compelled to participate in the investigation from the beginning. When the department finds her name etched onto the bullets of a murder victim, they haul her in. They question her like any other witness, but instead of being kept on the outside of the investigation, she is forced inside, both by her own drive to prove herself and the fact that she is the department's only link to a murder. And after her best friend is murdered and she is raped, what was insisted on by the department becomes, as they say, personal. And with the personal comes an escape from the bounds of the law, literalized for us when she punches a cop in the face in order to steal his uniform.

Interestingly, the film pairs the murder of Megan's best friend with Megan's rape as the twin engines of her need for revenge. And this overdetermined doubling overtop an already doubled compulsion to investigate is worth spending a moment to untangle. In popular criticism at its release, the rape was figured more prominently, but it is the murder that transforms Megan from being compelled by the department to being compelled by her own drives. That is to say, it is at the moment where it seems like narrative agency has been taken away, this series of horrible things has happened to her, that she takes it back. It is structurally more like the rape-revenge cycle of the 70s than horror necessarily. The question is not, will she escape, as is the case in horror, but how will she extract her revenge? Will she become a monster in the process? This seems to me a much more interesting question. Jacinada Read notes in her introduction to *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape Revenge Cycle*, *Blue Steel* is "something of a generic hybrid" although again she fails to articulate exactly what those genres are, and "both sexual and domestic violence against women pervades the film."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Read, *New Avengers*, 44.

As we will see in *Taking Lives*, the free expression of sexual desire is something that is unique to the Avenger but also has immediate narrative repercussions. The sexuality of *Blue Steel* is also complex. Megan is clearly sexualized and even given sexual agency. However, sexual expression is fraught with danger. Throughout the film Megan has been building professional and sexual rapport with Nick Mann(!). This finally culminates in a rather extended sex scene. But the audience is not the only enjoying the scopophilic pleasures. The psychopath Eugene is also watching. When Nick gets up to use the bath, Eugene shoots him and then takes his place in bed to rape Megan. The rape scene is extremely strange in *Blue Steel*, both structurally and visually. It seems an excess of excess. It is not necessary in terms of motivation. Megan is already on the hunt and fully motivated. The rape itself is depicted as violent and animalistic. It exceeds the bounds of realism (within which this film does not ever rest easily). It is more complicated, however, than punishing a desiring woman. The love scene with Nick served to humanize her, and the rape scene to feminize her. Only then can the narrative understand her need to de-sex herself in order to pursue her investigation. As a result, Megan is given free rein to once again take control of the narrative and filmic point of view as the camera and story come back into the intimate alignment of the opening scenes.

Lane claims that “In *Blue Steel*, Bigelow may stay within the terms of the cop/psychothriller genre, in which the gun is fetishized and women present a sexual threat; however she reverses its terms, exploring what happens when the governing symbolic imagery changes due to a female presence which oscillates between femininity, masculinity, and androgyny.” I would argue that this very oscillation pushes it outside the terms of the cop/psychothriller genre. In fact, I’m not totally sure what the terms of that genre are, what other films that belong to that classification. And that’s a problem. Dresner suggests that the lack at the

heart of Megan's narrative authority, that we know more than she does, turns the film structurally into a horror film. And this transforms her: from an investigator to a victim.<sup>16</sup> This is a common narrative move. But in *Blue Steel* it is Megan's victimization that once again gives her narrative and filmic control again.

### **3.4 TAKING LIVES: "MY INVESTIGATORS THINK YOU ARE SOME KIND OF WITCH"**

The focus on the investigation led by Angelina Jolie's character, Agent Ileana Scott, highlights her femininity. Not unusually, the crime-solving woman is the only one in a sea of men (other than Martin's mother as we will see). As we saw in the Adventurer mode this is a typical move in films featuring crime solving women, and more so in the more legitimized contexts of the Avenger, where she operates, at last ostensibly within the Law.

Not unusually, we see men (in this case the investigators on the case) who resent having an outsider, a woman, and an American brought in on the case. The head of the investigation tells his detectives: "She's not a cop. She doesn't need evidence. Doesn't need facts. All she needs is a murder site and a body and that's all we have." As if this is supposed to make them feel better about it. This sort of extended Mae West introduction is not at all unusual, and has been used since the earliest days of investigating women (See *The Penalty*, or *The Mystery of the Double Cross*),

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<sup>16</sup> Dresner, *Female Investigator*, 120.

as if, 90 years later the audience still needs to be properly prepared for the outrageous sight of a woman *doing* something. Not only is she foreign, an outsider and a woman, but she is a profiler and the FBI; her otherness could hardly be more overdetermined. But of course it is: the character is played by Angelina Jolie, who, while recognizably a woman, is hardly ordinary. While we hear the men discussing her, debating her value and necessity in terms of the case, the first time we see her is in the bottom of a grave—startling and gorgeous and speaking to Jolie’s star persona in very particular ways.

As she lays perfectly still the camera slowly pans her down face before pulling out to show her entire body at the bottom of a grave. After a few moments we see her hands start to twitch as if she is waking. The ambiguity here is that it plays with our expectations; we are so used to seeing women as victims, this is immediately what we assume about her. When the Canadian detectives peer over at her she squarely meets their eyes. As she rises from the grave and gets introduced all around, she begins to explain what she has seen or intuited. The detectives begin to lay out the case. “We think the victim was killed elsewhere and brought here.” “Umm, I...I think it was premeditated...” The hesitancy with which she describes what she is, in fact, clearly very confident about when questioned, creates a distrust of her from the beginning. She goes on to display a rather dazzling set of observations and the hesitancy seems more like a performance, a way to ease herself into the investigation through undercutting her natural prowess and authority with a display of almost girlish femininity. While she may display a typically feminized diffidence with her male colleagues at first, she does not back down from confrontation, nor does she doubt herself.

She goes with the Canadians to the morgue, where she performs an almost sensual examination of the body, alone, while they wait impatiently, and uncomfortably for her. This highlights her separateness from the other members of the team, her “otherness.” Her touch is

almost a caress, somewhere between maternal and necrophiliac. She is wholly absorbed in her investigation, paying no attention to the impatience of the ME waiting reading a magazine in the background, the hour, or the men discussing her outside the door. She is intent. When she finishes, she steps outside the morgue to join the Canadians and quickly and efficiently gives her impressions, as if what she had to say were not contentious or disturbing. She shrugs through the explicit alignment of sex and murder here (“He get’s off on it.”). This slightly off affective screen creates a dissonance.

It causes us to wonder about her, as much as the killer. What kind of person is she? This splits the generic drive of the investigation away from a single-minded search for a killer to a dual-focused investigation of her *qua* investigator. Already, in the first few minutes of knowing Agent Scott, we have explicitly seen her as victim (lying in a grave) and as psychologically peculiar and cold, aligning her with killer, the monster and of course as investigator. The fluidity between subject positions creates generic uncertainty. If a protagonist is in any one of those places, we understand the generic construct. The oscillation creates generic uncertainty, and as we will see that generic uncertainty allows for, perhaps even accounts for, a thematic investigation of gender.

Scott thinks very loudly. Sprawled on a curb, obsessively looking at the crime scene photos twitching manically she wakes up one of her investigators in the middle of the night without having slept so that she can talk out her thoughts. She is being shown as inherently unstable. She obsessively looks over the crime scene photos: as she eats, drinks coffee, in her bath, even as she sleeps the pictures are taped on the ceiling above her bed.

But perhaps the most intriguing thing about her style of investigation is that she investigates at all. This is a question that every crime-solving woman is asked and needs to answer in the course

of her narrative. If there is one thing that links the investigators in all the modes, it is this.

Ileana comes on to the case at the top of her field. She is brought in for her expertise. She wears a wedding ring to indicate that she is off the market, even as she admits to Costas, “There is no Mr. Agent Scott.” While the ring retains its symbolic value, keeping her free from masculine attention (as far as that goes, at least the pretense that she is unavailable), she continues to move forward in the case. As we will see, because she is distracted by her feelings for Costas, she makes mistakes, and her sexual encounter with him is not just a personal failure, but a professional one.

### 3.5 COMPULSION

In *Taking Lives*, Scott is driving James Costa (Ethan Hawke), a witness and potential suspect to a horrifying murder, back to his apartment after a failed attempt to use him as bait to catch the killer. As they drive through the streets of Montreal in the rain, the car dark and intimate, he asks her how she “lives with all the ugliness.”

“It’s my job.”

“There are different jobs.”

“Not for me.”

“You say that like it’s a punishment.”

“It’s not a punishment. It’s more like a compulsion.” And the word catches him and us.

“What compels you?”

She tells Costas the story of hearing a noise when she was 12, going downstairs to investigate (no cowering under the sheets for her, although she does say she thought it was her father) seeing an intruder. She grabbed a knife and ran toward him. He was only a 16-year-old kid out to steal the TV, “probably,” she says, thus leaving open the possibility of other more dangerous activities. She killed him. “And that’s what compels me,” she finishes. She is compelled in expiation for the sin

of killing someone who broke into her house when she was twelve.

This episode is not shown, despite its visual possibilities. Despite the fact that this film opens with a young person violently killing another young person. Despite the fact that Scott is our protagonist. It is narrated. This is important for study for several reasons. This first is that a violent woman remains an unsympathetic character.<sup>17</sup> So by not showing it, Scott is able to remain sympathetic. The fact that she gets to tell her own story, with her conclusions about it, seems to point to a degree of self-awareness and autonomy. However the term “compel” creates a level of uncertainty about her competency and agency.

The ambiguity, or dualness of compulsion is of critical interest here. On the one hand, compulsion arises from an inner drive, perhaps compelled by duty. But each person’s relationship with duty, what she feels she owes it, what she has a duty to, is individual, and again, comes from a unique sense of self. This gives the investigator self-motivation, or organization. But the psychological repetitiveness seems to imply a lack of control. So by calling a female investigator compulsive, one simultaneously proposes agency and takes it away. Of course Scott calls herself compelled, so this raises yet another issue.

What I do enjoy here, what I find refreshing, is that she is compelled by guilt, by something she did, a violence that she committed. She is not the victim in this scenario. She stabbed a kid in fear and self defense and feels bad about her over sized instincts that lead to a death. Fair enough, that is a reasonable back-story. So she is compelled by her response to her own actions. That seems to grant agency. But the word compulsion itself seems to evacuate choice.

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<sup>17</sup> See Hilary Neroni’s *The Violent Woman: Feminist, Narrative and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).



“I am compelled.” “I compel you to do something.” Two very different meanings. One is so active. There is something inherently magnetic, something so strong about “compel” which is one of the reasons I am drawn to it. I compel your attention. It is a compelling performance. There is something almost magical in the force that it describes. The flip side is the passivity of being compelled. At the same time it does seem to imply some sort of fight, or else you wouldn’t need such a strong word. No gentle “suggestion” here. Whatever side you are on, compulsion is a strong force.

But of course to be compulsive is never a good thing. Compulsion, or more specifically repetition compulsion is a foundational idea in Freudian psychoanalysis. It becomes more complex when one is compelled by some interior motivation. Here we do in fact get very close to the madness that Lisa Dresner asserts, but in its more modern guise, psychological illness. Compulsive disorder is remarkably gender neutral. *Monk* (2002-2009), for example, is OCD, obsessive compulsive. But at the same time OCD at least of the cleanliness/hand washing variety, seems so at odds with the business of investigation, where one literally gets ones hands dirty. Especially all of those empathetic women detectives who will actually put themselves in the place (lying in graves, on beds, in weird corners) of either the killer or the victim, in order to gain some sort of insight into the crime.

In terms of narrative, compulsion is a character flaw. It is “too much,” even if the thing or quality one is compulsive about is fundamentally sound. To work is good. To be a hard worker, even better. But to work compulsively? It implies a weakness of character, an inability to control and moderate one’s instincts. It is base. Slaves are compelled. Whores. Animals. Compulsion, compel...these words imply some sort of victim. It is always done *to* someone. Compulsion implies a certain consciousness, at least, perhaps even agency on the part of the one who is

compelled. One does not compel a rock or a mountain. Compulsion drives you to do something you don't want to do, something you think is wrong, it certainly has quite negative connotations. Compulsion is the mark of trauma on the level of character that the figure represents on the level of genre.

As a figure, Scott's compulsion undercuts the spectator's faith in her ability to successfully navigate the solution to the crime. Dresner in her book *The Female Investigator in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* makes this point extremely strongly (if a bit prescriptively) in her chapter, "Why All Female Investigators in Film Are Mad":

Since female investigators in film pose an intrinsic structural problem for a male-focused enunciation, we should not be surprised to find that the trope of madness follows close on the heels of any appearance of a female investigator. Madness is the logical enunciatory response to a subgenre requiring female characters to fill a structural position that has been over-determined as masculine.<sup>18</sup>

While her evidence is compelling, showing how investigators from Nancy Drew to Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs*, to Marge Gunderson in *Fargo* are figured as mad, she fails to show implication of this in terms of genre. A male detective, even if he were to describe himself as compelled, would not invite the same ambiguity, the same brush with madness. When Dresner says that all female investigators are mad, she's not wrong so much as she does not go far enough to explore the ways in which the madness plays out is figured in a film, and the way in which that madness *disfigures* a film. She makes a distinction in the way in which their madness is represented. Beyond undercutting her authority, there is something traumatic about compulsion, about being compelled.

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<sup>18</sup> Lisa Dresner, *Female Investigator*, 117.

In her book *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (which, to be sure, is a different moment than the one we are discussing), Jennifer Fleissner asks the question: “What happens when we rethink naturalism as a literature about compulsion...?”<sup>19</sup> She argues that the critique of naturalism articulates the fear that “naturalism must be separated out, and faulted, not because it acknowledges history’s affects but because, in so doing, it gets stuck in place—threatening the very possibility of a human agency that might alter history’s course.” In this view, naturalism “evacuat[es] the freedom of character and author together.”<sup>20</sup>

It is this about compulsion that draws me, the evacuation of freedom that it implies. It is not a choice, but a compulsion. The two are set up as opposites. Fleissner also notes that the distinction is reiterated in the theoretical dichotomy between the urge to narrate or describe. Realism vs. naturalism. But her argument seems to be that the compulsion is as creative potentiality. Scott calls herself compulsive, and Fleissner notes that what marks the naturalist mode is an obsession with “registering their surroundings.”<sup>21</sup> What else does a detective do? The danger is that the registration, the noticing of everything will become undifferentiated, will fail to make a pattern, tell a story, that the important clue will be lost in a sea of details.

One of the ways in which compulsion has classically been manifested in psychoanalysis is through sexual encounters. In *Taking Lives*, the apparent mystery is over at an hour fifteen. There has been an exciting car chase. The bad guy is dead. And then (and only then) does Scott sleep with Costas in an extended scene that borders on soft pornography. He knocks as she is taking

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<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 39.

down the crime scene photos from above her bed. She is only in a robe. The sex scene is extended and rather explicit. Her breasts are bared before he even kisses her and the entire encounter is wordless. He takes her against the wall, on top of a bureau before moving to the bed. He stays completely clothed as more and more of Jolie is exposed beneath the robe. While clearly consensual, there is an underlying violence to the scene, marked by the lack of dialogue or tenderness, and broken glass from a vase that they knocked over in their urgency. As he does lay her on the relative comfort of the bed, she looks up to see the photos of the victims. Again, the active reminders of murder undercut any resolution that might seem to be offered by their coming together. Typically in comparable moment, all reminders of the past, of any ugliness is erased and elided.

The post-coital morning is the only sunshine in the whole film as Scott rises from the their sun-dappled bed, Costas still sleeping peacefully. We don't even see the reminder of the photos above the bed. This moment of peace only lasts the in the space of time it takes her to walk across the floor to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror she sees blood on her face and neck as the soundtrack screams in alarm. She rushes to Costas to wake him, make sure he's alive, but he's only popped the stitches in his arm, the aftermath of his car wreck.

The next scene is at the hospital as he gets his arm stitched up and they giggle and flirt. Scott behaves positively girlishly. It seems in this moment that she has forgotten her compulsion. He murmurs about coming down to D.C. to be with her and start a new gallery. She seems intrigued but torn. Before she can answer, duty literally calls again. Mrs. Asher is at the morgue to identify the body of presumed killer (her son). But what is important to this inquiry is that her only moment of personal (thus, feminine) pleasure is immediately interrupted by duty. The man she was enjoying it with moments later hacks off the head of his own mother. Love, apparently, does not

conquer all.

The extended and seemingly gratuitous sex scene does not stop the plot, as it seems to, but rather propels it into its final act, once again transforming its generic terrain. Rather than marking the successful resolution of the mystery, reinforcing it with the success of the romance plot, this scene twists the two elements together and both mark her failure of perspicuity. While she described the killer perfectly, her profile proves absolutely correct in all of its detail, when confronted with the real thing, when she is no longer in the realm of the academic, but in the real, all the knowledge comes to nothing. She fails. To be fair, she is not the only one who fails, but she is the only one who slept with the killer and she is the one who is supposed to be an expert.

However, within the context of *Taking Lives*, Costas made love to her under false pretenses, as we will see. He disguised himself. And the self that he disguised was so horrifying that the aftermath of the truth was like the aftermath of a rape. And the film explicitly codes it as such; Jolie tries to scrub her body clean huddled naked on the white tiles of the bathroom floor. In this way, we could see the ending of the film in the context of the rape-revenge film. And its elaborate deviousness seems to uphold this theory. She took eight months to set him up, and it is unclear whether this was officially sanctioned or not. This goes far beyond any of her earlier effort to catch the criminal..

### **3.6 *TAKING LIVES* AND THE INVESTIGATION OF MASCULINITY**

*Taking Lives* takes masculinity as its subject, just as much, if not more, than it takes femininity,

making its ideological twists even more complex than its narrative. The film offers the vision of a woman investigating masculinity and finding, at its heart, it is either empty or murderous, or indeed, both. Philippa Gates writes of a certain kind of investigator, a group in which she includes Ileana Scott, “In a continuation of this strong female model, the contemporary criminalist is also masculinized or de-feminized and offers a resistance to male violence by tracking and bringing to justice the male serial killer. While detective films with a male protagonist focus on investigating the masculinity of the hero, those with a female protagonist are concerned with examining their heroes struggle as women in a man's world trying to balance a professional and personal life--and losing.”<sup>22</sup> Gates seems to be saying here that films featuring a woman detective don’t investigate femininity per se, nor masculinity. But I would argue that when directly confronting a deeply gendered universe, as these films inevitably are, one is inevitably investigating gender itself. *Taking Lives* is indeed a study of masculinity, but of a failed masculinity. The fact that Ileana Scott was attracted to this masculinity does have complex things to say about her and her femininity.

The film opens with an extended pre-credit sequence that is almost a complete little film in its own right. It features two teenaged boys (Paul Dano as Martin Asher and Justin Chatwin as Matt Soulsby) who meet on a Greyhound bus leaving Canada and strike up a friendship. When the bus breaks down, the two pool their resources to buy a broken down car to continue their trip. The feel of this opening segment is rather idyllic, feeling like a coming-of-age film as the more awkward Asher is taken under the wing of the older, more confident and certainly cooler Soulsby. Asher watches Soulsby intently, taking in his ease and attractiveness, his bravado and guitar playing. They listen to The Clash (“Should I Stay or Should I Go”) as they drive through a lush

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<sup>22</sup> Gates, “Manhunting.”

and tree-lined landscape. Suddenly, like a gunshot, a tire blows on the car and the two boys get out to assess the damage. Asher seems apologetic and Soulsby gets down to the business of changing the tire as Asher watches the road. Asher mumbles, “We’re about the same height” as a large SUV approaches. In a strike of sudden energy and violence, Asher kicks Soulsby into the path of the truck, causing a spectacular car crash. Asher assesses the damage in the quiet after the abrupt burst of violence, his expression hovering between delight and horror. After looking at the bloody mess in the truck, he returns to Soulsby—bloody and gurgling—in the deserted road. Asher reaches down and takes the injured boy’s wallet before picking up a rock and smashing it down on his head. Then we see Asher walking across the fields, with Soulsby’s bag and guitar singing the song Soulsby had been singing when the accident happened.

This opening offers us several clues about the rest of the film, both in terms of its structure, tone and subject. In the first few minutes of the movie we have been offered a dramatic generic shift, from road movie, or perhaps coming of age film, to horror and this shift of generic tone serves to reveal truths about the characters. Structurally, what seems like an ending (and is for Soulsby) is actually a beginning, quite literally beginning the film. In addition, the sequence addressed one of the films primary concerns—an interrogation of masculinity. It shows a “good”—easy confidant, attractive—masculinity in Soulsby, but reveals it as vulnerable and even stupid, and finally destroyed. Martin Asher, by contrast, is awkward, scraggly, lacking confidence and pathologically violent, but still squarely within a realm of recognizable masculinity—if of the awkward adolescent variety—but certainly a bad object.

After this sequence, the credits begin in a strange amalgam of black and white micro film images detailing murders—crime scene photos, newspaper articles, maps, and mug shots—interspersed with extreme close-ups of a man changing his appearance: a contact lens inserted into

an eye, hands cutting and dying hair, replacing a photo on a driver's license, a razor scraping through stubble, washing and removing rubber gloves through the bottom of a basin. Images of fingerprints are interspersed with a pumice stone sanding off the tips of fingers. Signatures coupled with a close-up of a hand practicing a signature, articles about dental records being removed cut with images of a mouth with false teeth being inserted.

The details of changing one's appearance, shown here not as vanity but as transformation, are the details of male grooming. This emphasis places certain notions of gender performance into the forefront. Masculinity itself is seen as a performance in the opening sequence. More typically, masculinity is seen as intrinsic, as natural, and is naturalized through detective films, although it is less unusual for a "bad guy" to be pictured as somehow not properly masculine (Peter Lorre's marvelous performance in *The Maltese Falcon*, complete with lavender calling card and exquisite manners comes to mind). But without this performance being corrected by a more normative masculinity (Bogart), a narrative imbalance is created in the film.

In this instance, there is no counteracting masculine force, but because the bad guy is not properly masculine it allows access for a female to unlock the crime. We see that the investigating woman emerges on the scene after an explicit failure of the male, either in terms of gender performance or problem solving (although in terms of narrative and ideology these two are frequently entangled). Femininity is rarely put in direct confrontation with masculinity. We rarely see successful women paired with successful men, the underlying assumption is that of course, femininity could never win, so masculinity must be handicapped from the beginning, embedded



in the premise of the film.<sup>23</sup>

But there is a sense that Martin/Costas is not a “real man.” It is not only that he is masquerading as these men whose lives he steals, but that he is masquerading as a man at all. We will see, however, that at the end of the film he needs to assert his masculinity through heightened sexualized violence, and Jolie provides him the foil by being extra feminine. He asserts his masculinity by beating up and stabbing a pregnant woman, pregnant with his child at that. He does not know it is a trap, that it is false, that he has been maneuvered into a subject position by her assumption of feminine traits. He tells her that she isn’t in love with the persona he was wearing when they met, the sensitive art dealer, but rather to the raw masculinity he is underneath it.

In a seeming break in the case, a witness is brought in who came upon the killer as he was smashing a new victim’s head with a rock. During the Scott’s initial interview with Costas the camera examines him as if he were a woman, breaking up his features, focusing on lips, eyes, hands, in tight close-up, mirroring the POV of Agent Scott, and like a woman, he is both sexualized and suspicious, the camera not differentiating between the two. After the interview the antagonistic (but extremely attractive and masculine cop) confronts<sup>24</sup> Scott, attempts to physically intimidate her. Costas calls to her as he passes them. And apparently he is attempting to rescue her, “I have three sisters who get that same look in their eyes when they are cornered and don’t like it.”

In a rather elaborate sting operation orchestrated by the cops, Costas is once again treated, both narratively and visually as a woman. First, there is a scene where he opens his shirt exposing

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<sup>23</sup> We see this change rather dramatically in contemporary television shows like *Bones* or *Law and Order: SVU*. Although we see that the terrain of those films is frequently “feminized” by explicitly addressing crimes against women and children.

<sup>24</sup> Thus again setting up the duality we saw in the first sequence, but twisting its valence.

his smooth white chest in a way that is very sexualized. The camera lingers over his skin as one of the (male) agents tapes the recording device to him. Then he is set up as bait. He is alone at a bustling nightclub, nervous, every approaching man a threat as Scott and the other agent listen in from the car. We will see later in the film how the notion of bait is reversed in its sexual polarity later in the film. Intriguingly, this scene only happens after we find that Scott is sexually available, the ring she wears on her finger a ruse. (“What does Mr. Agent Scott think about this?” “I’m not married.”) This revelation of her inherent femininity asserted by bringing the issue of her sexuality to the forefront, serves as an early tectonic indicator of an ideological shift.

As Costas sits nervously smoking, he gets a note written on a cocktail napkin, “Meet me in the Restroom.” While women are frequently portrayed as having whole conversations in public bathrooms, men seldom are, especially with this air of assignation, unless there is a (straight or gay) sexual component. The club is hallucinatory, disorienting darkly lit with manic laughter over the susurrus of conversation and the intrusion of the Philip Glass score taking over the diegetic music of the club.

That particular sting is called off, the next attempt is at his gallery opening, which coincides with the chaos of the Montreal Jazz festival, the streets are full of music, revelers and fireworks. When a mysterious man shows up (Keifer Sutherland), the cops are on the alert. He jumps out the window and they chase him through the streets only to lose him again.

The team decides Costas should get away, go to Toronto. His cover is blown. The older cop picks up him up to take him to the airport. Costas treats him as a porter, loading him down with small bags to take the car, leaving Costas alone to finish packing. As he is almost ready to go Sutherland appears. The encounter has a high level of sexual intimacy reengaging the ambiguous performances of masculinity. Sutherland has him by the neck, strokes his face and whispers gruffly

in his ear, “You have something that I want.” Costas kicks him in the groin (a strangely feminized move, not a punch or a shove or anything that requires strength, but the girly dirty blow). Costas reaches for his gun only to have it misfire (he forgot to cock it). The cop outside finally hears the cries from above and rushes in to investigate. Scott arrives (too late!),<sup>25</sup> hears gunfire and enters the apartment only to see the cop shot dead on the floor and the backdoor open. From outside she hears yells and then a car start. Before you know it she’s back in her mustang in hot pursuit. The front car crashes and Costas emerges, Sutherland’s character through the windshield, grabs the gun and shoots him hollering, “It’s him, it’s him! It’s Asher!” Scott runs up and pulls Costas away right before the car explodes.

Asher, as his “true” self, seems to exhibit a far more traditional, if excessive, masculinity, with his heightened aggression, verbal, physical and sexual. He asserts that this underlying masculinity is what Scott responded to, not the sensitive art-y type. To a certain degree, he is correct. She certainly seemed to respond to his masculinity in the bedroom, where there was very little about the sensitive art dealer about him.

The focus on a single individual for the exploration of a gender becomes absurd. While femininity is frequently treated this way (indicted for the behavior of one exemplary character), masculinity is not. More typically, and especially in genre film, we see masculinity glorified in the protagonist. But if it is the investigation of masculinity, it is of a specific form, a masculinity that is destroyed by women. We have seen the explicitly links in character between Scott and

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<sup>25</sup> See here Linda Williams on melodrama in “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.” *Film Theory and Criticism 5<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). This “too late” points to a new generic shift that is activated: the move from investigation to melodrama. This transformation will be borne out in the closing sequence.

Asher/Costa - both the assumed persona each take on and something seemingly more intrinsic, at the core of their characters. But if this were a film truly interested in an exploration of masculinity, why is there only one figure that it is really interested in, why are there not a series of men under investigation? Why doesn't the female investigator's look turn to others? While there are certainly other men in the film, their masculinity is assured (the other investigators) or they are killed off. The victims are all of questionable masculinity - boy in the beginning, the character played by Keifer Sutherland, the cop who is killed is the most gentle and kind and thoughtful of the bunch, not even getting the wrong idea when Scott knocks on his door in the middle of the night, but rather follows her around so he can set off her brilliance - these clearly being less masculine traits in the film's gendered universe obviating the problem.

So at its heart then, we have the investigator checking into a "wrong" masculinity, which reinforces the way in which the investigator leaps in only after a failure of masculinity. Here the failure isn't necessarily those of the cops (although that certainly is the anxiety hanging over them) but rather the failure of masculinity of the criminal, and it is a failure very neatly laid at the feet of a woman, his mother.

### **3.7 JUSTICE, REVENGE AND *TAKING LIVES***

As we have seen, the film links Scott and Asher through an investigation of their gendered identities. But her final revenge links them through compulsion. Her final revenge uses the technique, the patience, and the elaborateness that we frequently see aligned with the serial killer.

This makes the earlier identification of this film as a serial killer thriller even more fraught with ideological implications. While as Rubin pointed out, the detective thriller exhibits the moral entanglements of the detective, *Taking Lives* makes these entanglements explicit. By aligning Scott with the killer in this way it serves as a further way of showing the unsuitability of a woman for the job, as well as providing another generic turn. Both characters show a dangerous and compulsive desire to return home. If he had stayed away from Montreal, the city of his mother, she never would have recognized him and he wouldn't have gotten caught. It was the link of the mother that laid him low. And of course her compulsion is to mimic him, to return to her home, because it is something he would understand. But the parallels are explicit and they are linked to motherhood.

The process of investigation pushes Scott both outside of the context of the law, into the dangerous terrain of revenge, as well as pushing her to the limits of femininity. While this is clearly a detective thriller, as each layer of the film unfolds, it shifts its generic (as well as character) focus. Oddly, the two characters almost perfectly exhibit the characteristics of the impulse image; they are tied together through their compulsion. Deleuze outlines three aspects of the impulse image: 1) that the impulse emerges from an originary world, but is “inseparable from the perverse modes of behavior that they produce,” 2) the “object of the impulse” is partial and torn from the originary world, a fetish, or in this case, a clue; and 3) “the destiny of the impulse is to take possession through guile, but violently, of everything that it *can* in a given milieu, and if it can, to pass from one milieu to another.”<sup>26</sup> The third aspect perfectly describes the move of Asher, who “like a

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<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 128-129.

hermit crab” steals his victims lives, until he gets restless enough to move on. It is the compulsive desire to move on, to take new personas, that is linked with his murderousness. Everyone, the film seems to say, has wanted to trade places with someone, that desire magnified get you a serial killer.

Her revenge mirrors his own technique: she takes on the persona of someone different from her. Perhaps we can see this as a sort of wish fulfillment on her part, as well as an elaborate performance for him. In effect, however, the revenge that Jolie takes at the end of *Taking Lives* is for his sexual crime. It goes beyond duty. While she might lay in an open grave to get a feel of what it might be like to be a victim (beyond dead, one imagines), she is a professional, a profiler, and the bulk of her job seems to be looking at gruesome pictures, writing on a white board, and empathizing really hard. But most disturbingly, it is a sort of obsessive repetition of her own ordinary world, reenacting the event that still compels her. She stabs and kills an intruder in her home. Only here the threat is very real, if contrived. This creates another level of ambiguity and distrust of the investigator.

Justice, and unlike revenge, is in a context that is approved by society. There are many places for justice to get mislaid/waylaid whatever, but if you are going about solving a crime, then you must believe that there is some sort of context for that crime to be adjudicated. To believe in justice is to acquiesce to the Law, so in this sense crime-solving women are always firmly situated within patriarchal order. However, their re-positioning themselves vis-à-vis that hierarchy produces narrative disjunction. But to carry out your own revenge is to rather definitively put yourself outside the law. The ambiguity of the ending, the line between revenge and justice, between bait and heroics, between inside and outside of the law is one of the ways in which the ideological complications of the figure is made writ. The fact that we see the most horrible things happen to Jolie before she triumphs, and that the violence is so deeply gendered adds yet another

layer of complexity.

After witnessing the horrifying vision of Costas in the elevator holding his mother's severed head, Scott returns to her hotel room and puts the series of events together in flashback. Her intellect is able to connect all of the dots if too late to save Mrs. Asher. She gets fired from the Bureau. We follow her to Carlisle Pennsylvania where we see her pregnant in a very feminine print dress living alone in a bleak farmhouse. Her pregnant state is the height of femininity, indeed the most vividly visual sign of femininity, but it also underlies a theme that runs through the film: motherhood.

Avengers are not mothers. Maternity is another guise of femininity that they can try on, but it is not the place in which they live. Nor are their relationships outside the investigation center stage. This is why this mode bears so much resemblance to the detective genre, but also why they are the least "feminine." In this mode, they operate more like men than in any other mode. Their female-ness is less defining in this mode than in others, is more of a performance.

If one of the issues that inevitably a female investigator must face is this tension between inside and outside, between work and personal life (i.e. A family), then the final scene seems the ultimate expression of it. Phillipa Gates articulates this conflict in her article on women detectives in serial killer films:

Similarly, the contemporary female detective has risen through the ranks because she has sacrificed the traditional female roles of wife and mother to pursue a career in the male sphere of law enforcement. Rather than being a nurturer to a man, she is a threat to him as competition in his professional life. While she may excel at her job, she tends to dress like a man (or not in a feminine manner), is sexually aggressive, and has no desire for a committed relationship. Whether or not this is acceptable behavior for a woman in American society in the twenty-first century is beside the point as for Hollywood this can signify nothing other than that she is neurotic and unhappy even if she believes otherwise. In other words, the female detective can only succeed at her professional life if her personal life suffers. While this is not necessarily a new trope for the genre, it is certainly highlighted in the contemporary detective film as this representation of women seems out of date in

today's climate of female advancement in professional circles.<sup>27</sup>

Scott seems to literally sacrifice her family, or her potential family, and most certainly the most sacred image of womanhood, to her job, in order to catch a villain that got away, in the most violent way imaginable. But in a very real way, she has completely sacrificed her personal life within the diegetic world to catch her man. She apparently has been planning this and in wait for the last 8 months, living by herself in the middle of nowhere.

Very early in the film, we see Gena Rowland's character rushing anxiously off the ferry and telling the first policeman she sees that she has seen her dead son. And that he is a very dangerous man. She is anxious. She smokes. The inherent contradiction of what she is saying does not seem lost on her. On the one hand, the fact that a woman initiates the investigation, albeit in a rather hysterical way, is typical of all the films featuring an investigating woman. It is a woman's (in this case a mother's) instinct that sets the plot in motion. But here the idea of motherhood itself is deeply ambivalent and complicated. And clearly a failure at motherhood, the ideological apotheosis of femininity in patriarchal society, is a failure of womanhood itself.

Other than Angelina Jolie, Gena Rowlands, as Martin's mother "Mrs. Asher", is the only other female named character in the film. The bad mother as object occupies a curious ideological space within the film, amplified by Rowland's star persona. The film that role most directly speaks to is *Gloria*, one of Rowland's collaborations with John Cassavetes, in 1980 in which she plays a woman who hates kids but ends up the protector of a young kid whose parents were killed by the mob. Mrs. Asher is blamed both explicitly by Costas/Asher ("All I ever wanted was to love you

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<sup>27</sup> Philippa Gates, "Manhunting."



and you wouldn't let me," he says right before he saws her head off with a knife) and indicted by the film for being a bad mother. This evacuation of responsibility of men for their actions and failures creates a peculiar ideological gap, although it attempts to have it both ways in the grand tradition that goes back to Adam and Eve.

The challenge is with Angelina Jolie as the pregnant woman, or rather the way in which her faux pregnancy is designed to seduce Costas into returning for her. Throughout the film, she has shown that at the core of Asher's pathology is an issue with his mother, as witnessed by his gruesome beheading of her after sulkily blaming her for his craziness: "All I ever wanted was to love you. But you wouldn't let me.... You ruined everything." It comes across as both pathological and explicitly Freudian. It is also the only murder we witness since his first adolescent attempt (although the actual deed is hidden by the elevator doors we hear the lead up, see the fear, and witness the aftermath). Thus her appearance as a pregnant woman not only heightens her appearance of femininity but speaks directly to the thematics of bad motherhood that the film has established. It is her pregnancy that draws Costas/Asher in.

The final sequence is one of deep ambiguity and almost unbearable tension and violence. As she sits alone and glowing in a rocking chair, Asher is there, in the farmhouse. He taunts her. "I knew you were waiting for me." And she sits silently and cries with her mouth open. She attempts to reach for one of the guns that she has hidden all over the house, signs that she has been fearing or expecting his arrival. But he has found them. He slaps her across the face hard enough to knock her down. His increasing violence enacts a terribly vivid portrait of domestic violence. The domestication of our female investigator reinforces all of our doubts in her.

Scott defiantly announces, "These are James Costa's babies. I don't know who you are." This reinvigorates his mastery, the elision of his personas: he fooled her. Her skills as a profiler

were no match for him. He pulls a garrote in his pocket. The garrote was the weapon of choice for Asher's murders. Other than his mother (with whom he has clear issues), all of this victims were men. Using the same technique with Scott, especially in her now highly feminized aspect, makes her gendered ambiguity more apparent. They struggle. Her pregnancy makes her seem more vulnerable and seems to give the fire of maternal protectiveness to her fight. She attempts to reach for some large sewing shears but he gets to them first and, shockingly, stabs her in the belly.

But we are in for a final reversal. She pulls the scissors out of her swelled belly and stabs him with them in the chest. "Everything you saw, I wanted you to see." She pulls the fake belly out. "Fuck you." As she calmly watches him die. It was all an elaborate sting. And ends with the dulcet strains of Bono singing, "Surrender." Her triumphant "fuck you" after stabbing Martin/Costa in the heart seems to be a violent celebration of female kick-assery. But there is a forlorn tone to the ending as she makes the phone call and sits beautifully framed (very Vermeer) in front of the window, seemingly waiting as the film fades out. This forlorn quality, still alone, still isolated, if at least in communication with the head of the Montreal department where the case was happening, is what we are left with.

Even as we understand that this final violent confrontation was an elaborate put on, we experience it in film time. This is peculiar for the shift in focus that is implied. Throughout the film, the point of view has followed Jolie's character (although not exclusively). It is only in the opening sequence, years before she was on the case that we see something that she can't have known (although we do see her finding it on microfilm!) The opening vignette is the only time we stray for any significant time from her and knowing what she knows. The film breaks a kind of contract with us by having her know *more* than we do, of plotting behind our back, as it were, putting the audience in the position of the serial killer.

But she does get punished for this behavior. It's somehow OK to show because "Hey, she's not really pregnant," in either the real (Jolie) or diegetic world. But of course watching this film today is complicated by our knowledges of Jolie, her extremely visible commitments to maternity and the series of distraught mothers she has recently played. There are two questions I'm left with. 1) As per the narrative is this trap somehow justified or allowed by the powers that be as the phone call seems to indicate? That is, is it a legitimate and legitimized set up? And 2), how is this different than the numerous kinds of "honeytrap" setups we have seen women perform throughout sting operations? If we are denied her subjectivity in the set up, how is it different other than the fact that she says so? She does it completely on her own, she is not rescued.

*Taking Lives* throws into question what is performance and what is real with the whole elaborate end set piece. While I was glad to find they hadn't totally eviscerated the strength of the character and that she could recover once she totally fucked up, it was so elaborate and unlikely. He uses his violence on a woman so pregnant. But then she's not really pregnant so it's not so repugnant. It also gives her total carte blanche to be as violent (as "tactile," as she calls it in the beginning of the film) as she wants. But she knows he, too, is *compelled* to return to her and finish the thing. She is, in fact, acting out his fantasy, and then twisting it. She is *purposefully* setting a trap, not passively and fearfully waiting to be attacked. But by setting the trap she both twists her gendered identity and her generic identity.

### 3.8 THE AVENGER AND STAR PERSONA

*"She's both hot and sinister—and a performer uninhibited by any cinematic disaster*

*happening around her.*"<sup>28</sup>

The issues around star persona cannot be divorced from issues of genre. The kinds of roles in which we begin to expect stars to perform exist in particular kinds of films, that is, in particular genres. In the Classical Hollywood system these roles and these genres were carefully maintained, with generic crossover being the exception. In contemporary Hollywood however, roles across genres are expected of any "serious" actor. With the opening up of stardom that happens after the dissolution of the classic Hollywood period, there is also complimentary change in the ways genres are constructed. Their outlines are looser.

One of the reasons I chose *Taking Lives* was because it stars Angelina Jolie. She is a powerhouse. Her position in the film activates and plays off her complex star persona. The actresses that portray the Avengers are some of the most beautiful women in Hollywood, or figured as such in magazines. The women who play Avengers tend to also pursue a career in Romantic Comedy—with all the hazards to the dignity of women that that entails, and all the essentialism about women that it portrays—as if to mitigate the anxiety that they might provoke in the uneasy position of Avengers. Sandra Bullock, in both *Miss Congeniality* and the darker *Murder By Numbers* (Schroeder, 2002), Ashley Judd in such roles as *Double Jeopardy*, *Kiss the Girls*, or even *Twisted* is able to be beautiful, tough and vulnerable on screen. As is Julia Ormond in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. These actresses are undeniably "feminine"; these are not women with "boyish" frames, nor tomboy personas, or even more subtle kinds of femininity. Their star personas are deeply entwined with their femininity. Jolie is intriguing here, with her exotic looks; there was

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<sup>28</sup> Basinger, *Star Machine*, 549.

never anything she could do that would make her unfeminine. She played fierce and unconventional characters, but was most successful in roles where her femininity, which is quite literally embodied, was highlighted, even (or perhaps especially) as she is violent. In addition to this kind of dangerous violent femininity, she began her now enormous family and motherhood that inextricably colors our impression of her.

Angelina Jolie is dangerous and a humanitarian, home-wrecker and ideal mother. She was always excellent gossip fodder. From her earlier incarnation of kissing her brother inappropriately at an award show, to wearing a vial of (her older slightly inexplicable husband) Billy Bob Thornton's blood around her neck, to breaking up the fairy tale pairing of Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston and stealing him away to create an even more fairy tale world with him. The stories in circulation about her are all deeply embedded in anxieties about her sexuality, which when coupled with her extraordinary looks, must be voracious and unpredictable.

Jeanine Basinger, in her insightful survey of Hollywood stardom, *The Star Machine*, explicates the frequently precarious position of the modern "star" without the force of the Hollywood machine behind her. On the one hand there are more choices, but on the other there is less security. As she notes in her discussion of Jolie, "Jolie has an overall filmography that is less than stellar. She is famous because the fanzines need to write about *someone*, so it may as well be a genuinely charismatic woman...Fans don't *need* to watch her films. Jolie, like a rock star, *lives* her type. Her roles are only pale imitations of her off-screen self."<sup>29</sup> Basinger views Jolie through the lens of classic Hollywood types, marking her as a mix of "the sex symbol and the 'exaggerated

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<sup>29</sup> , Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine*. (New York: Random House, 2008), 548. (Italics original).

woman' of old-time female melodrama.”<sup>30</sup>

When did Jolie actually become a star? Where in her trajectory was she when *Taking Lives* was released? In 2001, she starred as Lara Croft, perfectly encapsulating the video game action hero. In 2010, she was given the lead role that was written for Tom Cruise in *Salt* (Noyce), who before his Scientology breakdown was one of the most bankable action stars in Hollywood. In between she has played killers (in the wonderfully pulpy *Wanted* (Bekmambetov, 2008), CGI animated evil (as Grendel's sexy mother in *Beowulf* (2007)) in addition to other animated roles, a humanitarian (*Beyond Borders*, 2003) and finally desperate mothers (*A Mighty Heart* (2007) and Clint Eastwood's *Changeling* (2008)). As Basinger states, these all seem to be aspects of her persona. Earlier in her career, she played the sexy crazy ones (*Gia* (1998), *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), and *Pushing Tin* (1999). And it was certainly in this early phase of her career that she rose to media attention, with her passionate acting and explosive sexuality in addition to her tabloid fodder history. (She is John Voight's daughter and their relationship's ups and downs are as histrionic as any other part of her career.)

*Taking Lives* was not even her first role as a female investigator. 1999's *The Bone Collector*, (intriguingly, another film that could be considered within the modality of the Avenger) features her as a smarter than average beat cop. But curiously, she is the body in that film (physically doing the work for the quadriplegic Denzel Washington) but her body is figured in an unusual way. While it is the active body, the body that does things, it is guided by his wisdom, sometimes, quite literally guided by his voice and superior intelligence as he virtually directs her through commands over a phone. (Perhaps anticipating the pleasures of video games that Lara

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<sup>30</sup> Basinger, *Star Machine*, 548.

Croft activates. Lara Croft can kick ass, but in the video game she is controlled by whoever is playing her). And it is the body that one hates (loves!!) to see in jeopardy. But in the film she plays perhaps her least explicitly feminized role.

But as this film is released, her persona is in flux. Jolie's position in the film in some way reflects the position of the figure of the female investigator. Because of her committed, if odd performance, the film has trouble finding a foothold and is perhaps best known for its extremely steamy sex scene which features a great deal of her body, as a brief Google search will attest. It is as if her body, like her persona, and like the character she plays, cannot be contained within the film. Everything bleeds outwards. And it is her persona that gives both the sex and the violence of the ending its impact. I would argue that it is Jolie's positioning in the film that rescues it from its own pulpiness, perhaps to its detriment, giving the seediness an almost unbearable weight. But most disturbingly, is the way it plays off her very recent motherhood. Images of a pregnant and glowing Jolie were already in circulation. Thus the image of her in the film merged in a peculiar way with the images of her in the tabloids, adding an almost literal heft to her performance and making the end result more horrifying.

To return to Basinger's activation of Jolie as sex symbol (that seems obvious and early roles certainly liked her as sexy but vulnerable and perhaps a bit dangerous) and the "exaggerated woman" of melodrama (which she enters into fully in her later roles, although perhaps we could see Lara Croft fitting in here). But there was never quite the combination in Classical Hollywood or even in *noir*, although perhaps we come closest in the *femme fatale*. The tension between the two roles is problematic, especially positioned in a genre in which neither figure was used as a protagonist. They were the problems, not the heroes.

### 3.9 ZERO DARK THIRTY: DEPICTION IS NOT ENDORSEMENT<sup>31</sup>

*“It’s her against the world.”*

I’d like to finish this chapter with a discussion of *Zero Dark Thirty*, Bigelow’s account of the hunt for Osama bin Laden. There has been much ink spilled over this film: its politics and the politics of torture hotly debated. But I find it intriguing that Bigelow herself calls it a detective film, or rather writes that she believes Osama bin Laden was found “through ingenious detective work,” which is not quite the same thing. Labeling it “just” a genre film seems a move to evacuate its political and ethical dilemmas, as if the United States use of torture were no more problematic than driving a car into a helicopter.<sup>32</sup> However, as we can see through this study, when the subject matter gets too much for one genre, it brings in more to cope with the excess and to offer us moments of spectacle.

*Zero Dark Thirty* organizes a different set of generic tropes and narrative structures than we have seen. This film is unique in that it combines the war film and the detective film. That means that we have a female protagonist pulled between two genres that are understood to be deeply masculine, none more so perhaps than the war film, a genre from which women are singularly absent. We are pulled along its two and a half hour runtime on the trajectory of real-life events and the familiar sounds of Brian Williams reporting the news. However, the figure of the

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<sup>31</sup> Kathryn Bigelow, “An Open Letter” January 15, 2013. *LA Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/15/entertainment/la-et-mn-0116-bigelow-zero-dark-thirty-20130116>

<sup>32</sup> See *Live Free or Die Hard* (Wiseman, 2007).



investigating woman as Avenger is strikingly similar and functions and is articulated in recognizable ways.

As much as it *is* a detective film, its investigator is clearly Maya (Jessica Chastain). Like Agent Scott, Maya is beautiful, arrayed in a black pantsuit and deeply compelled to investigate. And in a way the “enhanced methods of interrogation” don’t matter to the detective construction, but only to the construction of her character. It serves to demonstrate her toughness, her willingness to do anything, her compulsion. What matters is the way she builds her case; she puts together clues from scraps, deep knowledge of the field, and a mind that makes connections. But mostly she solves the case through grindingly unending labor. In many ways she is the opposite of *Blue Steel*’s Megan Turner. She is without ambivalence; no one asks her why she does it. She just does with complete confidence. We are offered the 9-11 recordings over a black screen at the opening of the film as a sort of explanation, and a compelling one. After the horror of that day, no one can question why *anyone* would do this work. She, to quote Gracie Hart in *Miss Congeniality*, “*is the job.*”

She never drops the case. She is always working. The fundamental difference between her and the other agents is that she never stops. The first investigator we meet Dan (Jason Clarke) goes back to Washington after he’s “seen too many dudes naked.” Once there he loses his intensity and becomes more and more of a company man. Her station chief (Kyle Chandler) gets sent home as a scape goat for the “enhanced methods of interrogation” when it blows up. Finally, there is her colleague and friend, Jessica (Jennifer Ehle.) As we see Maya and Jessica’s friendship develop, we see Jessica as infinitely *more human*. She drinks, she smokes, she laughs, she has an accent, she gets excited, she bakes cakes, she wears skirts. We even find out she is “the mother of three.” And she dies.

Her femininity is important but is not portrayed as sexualized. It is not how she uses it, or performs it. It is the essential fact that she is (presents as) a woman that has power to shock and to humiliate. Her witnessing adds to the detainees humiliation. Her measuring gaze is part of the interrogation. Her difference is important. Marked by her scarf, she makes no attempt to hide that she is a woman. When she goes undercover, it is literally to change her appearance. She does not change anything else about her appearance. She puts on a wig to disguise her very noticeable red hair. The wig does not make her *more attractive*. It just makes her look different and less recognizable. But her wig provides *her* some protection, some separation. Being known is dangerous. Even as she travels, there is no glamor. It's the same black pants suits. Her office is filthy and dreary. There is no relief.

When Jessica asks Maya, “Do you have any friends at all?,” the deviation from the investigative narrative literally explodes. Maya has met up with Jessica at the Marriot in Islamabad for a drink. As they sip their wine and Jessica, at least, makes some chitchat, the investigation pauses. As if in direct retaliation for this dereliction of duty, the place blows up. This is the only scene in the film that we see Maya explicitly not working. Even when she is mourning, she sits in her office. When she is home, she is watching the television, making connections. And here in the middle of the film, in the middle of the investigative part of the narrative, the war genre intervenes.

We see her detective work bracketed by twenty minutes of torture at the beginning and the forty-five minutes of SEAL team action at the end. Films featuring the Avenger tend to activate generic codes commonly understood as masculine—the procedural, the thriller, the serial killer tale. The war film changes the scale. In his review of the film for the *LA Times*, Kenneth Turan writes:

Here, Chastain plays Maya, a CIA officer who quite literally devotes every waking moment of her life to finding and destroying Bin Laden. Her single-minded ferocity and stubbornness not only prove essential in the hunt, but also make up the emotional through line that engages us in the story of "Zero Dark Thirty."

What is most exciting about Maya is that screenwriter Mark Boal (who collaborated with Bigelow on "Hurt Locker") has shrewdly written her less like a heroine and more like an archetypal big-screen hero.<sup>33</sup>

What does it mean to be "less like a heroine and more like an archetypal big-screen hero"? I would argue that this difference is not so much in the way in which she is written as with the questions of genre and scale. The shift is not necessarily in the figure as an Avenger, which is easily recognizable, but in the fact that what she is investigating matters. The search for bin Laden is universally understood as important. The evocation of *real* life, while politically problematic, makes the scale so much bigger than a hunt for a serial killer. This investigation matters on a global scale. But still Chastain's physicality and delicacy are what we see, even as she shows us Maya's toughness, intellectually, physically and even politically as she counts the days since pinpointing the compound where she is sure that bin Laden is hiding, creating an unbearable tension in the film. She does not need to *say* that she is compelled, as Agent Scott does repeatedly. There is no question of it. She is not quite human. She is so driven that it seems like her humanness is washed away. Her costumes transform from pantsuits to t-shirts and jeans. She doesn't seem to take pleasure in anything but things directly related to her search. She even gets voice over. She is the mind. She is not the body. When she gets shot at it is just one more thing between her and her work.

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Turan, *LA Times* movie review, December 18, 2013.  
<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-zero-dark-thirty-review-20121219,0,252655.story>

In her mourning for the death of her friend, she does not cry. She plots revenge. When asked what she is going to do, she responds, “I’m gonna smoke everybody involved in this op and then I’m gonna kill bin Laden.” This is the response of a hero, not a heroine. The entire film is anchored in very American notions of individuality and the hero.

In a quiet moment, James Gandolfini as Leon Panetta asks her why she thinks the CIA recruited her, she refuses to respond. “I don’t think I’m allowed to answer that, sir.” Only the CIA director with his naiveté (“Can’t you just put a camera in a tree or something?”) would even think to ask her why she does what she does. “What else have you done for us besides bin Laden?” “Nothing. I’ve done nothing else.” The investigation is her whole life. She is obsessed. She is compelled. She is not, however, intimidated by the political maneuvering involved in transforming her investigation into action. She publicly counts the days since they found the bin Laden’s compound by writing the number on her chief window. But it is not her job to convince the higher ups. . She is so confident of herself. She does not defer. She is fierce. She threatens.

When it comes time to brief the team that actually goes in to the operation, she gets to tell the narrative. She gets to tell the team their target is Osama bin Laden. She is given narrative control. When they talk amongst themselves, but in her hearing, about what the operation, it is “her confidence” that assures them. We are also left with the very familiar picture of her waiting while the men go off to do their thing. And their thing dramatically pulls focus. The Seal Team part of the film is overstuffed and overdetermined with war film tropes, from the team being briefed on the secret mission and the new weaponized toys they get to play with (in the case stealth helicopters). They are competent and wary. We are given an extremely efficient glimpse of the team, our empathy anchored in betting on horseshoes, Tony Robbins, and dogs. It bears all the semantic and syntactic markers except that it exists within the detective narrative. It interrupts it

as much as any plot-stopping sex-scene. It is spectacular and gripping but fundamentally in excess to the investigation.

But her waiting is monitoring, is witnessing, is pulling them along by the sheer force of will. The suspense of the war scenes echoes, and recreates the suspense of the whole film. We know *someone* is going to succeed. But will it be them? And will they survive it? We are left to forget her. Throughout this sequence, the film cuts back to her, her translucent skin and fierce eyes. When the team returns from their successful operation, she is excluded from their easy camaraderie. As the laugh and clap backs in a masculine release of tension, she moves through their ranks, her red hair floating and her delicate features and build in direct contrast with their large camo-covered frames.

But it is she who confirms the kill. With a nod, it *is* Osama bin Laden. She walks outside and while we still hear the muffled celebration, she is alone. As she leaves she is the only one on the transport plane. Her isolation is complete. Her compulsion left no space for the human, for companionship. She succeeded but what does she do now? We hear the pilot ask her where she is going, but she offers no answer.

We are never allowed on the inside of anybody in this film. *Zero Dark Thirty* isn't interested in interiority. What cannot be conveyed by Maya saying to head of the CIA, "I'm the motherfucker who found this place, sir," has no room in this film. Is it this lack of insight, of backstory, that led Turan to write that she is written like a hero, not a heroine? Or is it the genres that the film operates in? Because her gender *does* matter. She is an Avenger.

### 3.10 CONCLUSION

The genres that the Avenger looks to in its excess, are uniquely, not considered feminine ones. The procedural, the thriller, the serial killer tale, the war film: these are not the domain of women in Hollywood. This makes the desire to situate her as feminine even more ideologically vital. The women in the Avenger mode are likely to “perform” a kind of very feminine femininity, but it is clearly *as performance*.<sup>34</sup> They just as frequently don’t. This highlights the idea that femininity is not inherent. It is not inevitable. It de-constructs the link between being a person and performing gender. And the rather gruesome ending of *Taking Lives* illustrates this beautifully: even the most fundamentally feminine articulations, pregnancy, can be faked. However, our shock at the transgression illustrates the complex relationship the narrative and visual and affective fields have to one another.

As a result of the contradiction between the imperatives of genre and gender performance, the Avenger is more likely than crime solvers in other modes to be sexually active. The ways in which this sex interacts with the narrative is curious and uncomfortable. Even narratively consensual sex twists into something else as we saw in both *Blue Steel* and *Taking Lives*. There is a darkness to the sexual encounters that is incontrovertible. The sex tends to be violent and is often under false pretenses. The partner is never who he says he is. His lies are a form of compulsion, a form of rape. Sex here is not shown as empowering, and even any pleasure is shown as vulnerability. This attitude towards sex reinforces the idea that sex is always dangerous for women.

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<sup>34</sup> This is quite different from the way femininity is performed in other modalities. The affective mode, which portrays the most consistently feminine characters, doesn’t have them play at it in quite the same way.

Even when they take pleasure in the encounter, they will regret it, be betrayed by it.

In the British series, *Prime Suspect*, the sexual world of the police is portrayed quite differently, but frequently to the same effect. It shows the incompatibility of having a relationship and a profession: her lover expects her to plan a dinner party for his business associates while she is on a murder case and leaves her because of her failure. Or perhaps leaves her after this final sign of her failure. At the same time however, the plots tend to circle around the sexual improprieties (and worse) of the men on the force. This tends to have a mitigating effect. This serves to reinforce the idea that women make poor detectives. Their poor decisions in romantic or sexual entanglements, if not prove, at least reinforce, their inherent weakness as crime-solvers. It is only when this is taken to its inevitable conclusion, when everything vulnerable or feminine is burned away, as in *Zero Dark Thirty* that the Avenger finds real success.

## 4.0 THE COMEDIC—THE UNDECIDEABLE

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

*There's Always a Woman* seems to be one thing but really is another, just like its heroine, Sally Reardon (Joan Blondell). As a character and as an investigator, she is a bundle of contradictions: warm and gold digging, dizzy and persistent, intuitively brilliant and absolutely bumbling. Generically, the film offers even more muddles. Produced in 1938, it is situated between the films of *The Thin Man* series (The first released in 1934, the second in '36 and the third in '39). This film was understood as capitalizing on the popular series. The *New York Times* called it “a *Thin Man* of the lower-income brackets,”<sup>1</sup> And like it, *There's Always a Woman* features both a twisty mystery and a husband and wife “team.” She is the protagonist. She drives the actions. She is the star. And if she is evenly matched up with Melvyn Douglas, the pairing does not take away from her, but rather allows her to expand as an actor and as a character. Joan Blondell dominates this film, even over bigger stars like Mary Astor.

A brief examination of the differences and shifted emphases between the films will shed light on both *There's Always a Woman* and *The Thin Man*. *The Thin Man* opens with the possibility

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, April 29, 1938.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B0CE1D71438EE3ABC4151DFB2668383629EDE>



of young love as Miss Dorothy Weinert introduces her fiancé to her dad (the object of the case) and sets up all the clues of the case. We meet the entire cast of characters around the mystery: the daughter, the missing man's gold digging lover and her gangster friend, his accountant, his lawyer, his ex-wife and her new husband. This set-up places the emphasis of the narrative on the mystery rather than the detectives. At the same time, all of the suspects are related through "romantic" or at least familial relations. It is a full eleven and a half minutes before we meet our hero, Nick Charles, as he shows the bartender how to mix a martini and gets confronted by the lovely young lady worried about her missing father. After the mystery is introduced, we meet Nora being pulled onto her face in a pratfall. Nora comes in with her arms full of packages being pulled along by the dog Asta who apparently remembers the place from his walks with Nick. Nick and Nora sit together at a table and share some lovely banter before she asks him how many drinks he has had: he tells her the current one is his sixth and she asks the waiter for five more martinis. She is fun; she is a great sport. Nora has an innate intelligence and dignity that makes her extremely appealing, while at the same time she is not fazed by anything. But, she is clearly secondary. Nick is on the case and while she encourages him to take it up and would love to be involved, he does all of the heavy lifting with her ironic admiration. They are eminently sophisticated. "Oh, Nicky, I love you because you know such lovely people," she sighs after hosting a party with all his rather unusual and frequently unsavory associates from his former detecting days. And it's true, that is why she loves him.

The romance between Nick and Nora is never in question, never in jeopardy. The satisfaction of their marriage is part of the satisfaction of the film. They are a perfect couple. The cool supreme confidence of Nick Charles—he is never startled never caught out—mirrors (and is mirrored in) the stability of their marriage. He will solve the crime (unraveling it to his, and our,

satisfaction) in a grand dénouement: Nick gathers everyone for a dinner party and lays out the whole sordid mess and solves everything and the guilty party is apprehended. It is all very civilized. Nora is as impressed with Nick as we are. While she is interested and wants desperately to be involved (indeed is highly instrumental in setting Nick on the case in the first place) she does not do anything to solve the crime. She is plucky and amazing, but she is not a detective. If she were not in it, the film would be infinitely less charming but it would still be a detective film.

Like *The Thin Man*, *There's Always a Woman* is a rich combination of comedy and mystery, but here the couple is more balanced in what they do on-screen. In tone and rhythm, it feels like a screwball romantic comedy. In terms of its narrative structure, however, it is not. The love of the two characters is never in question, never in jeopardy, even as they roar through their hijinks like Punch and Judy. In fact, the old pantomimes might be its clearest predecessor. But there is never any narrative doubt about the success of their relationship. Their relationship is already successful. They are evenly matched.

*There's Always a Woman* begins by inverting our expectation and setting up the priorities of the film. In the opening scene, Mrs. Reardon rides in the back of a police car as unconcernedly as if she were in the back of a taxicab. It turns out the cops were, in fact, just giving her a lift. After being handed out of the car by a very admiring beat cop ("What a Woman!"), she comes upon her husband in a scene with his weeping secretary offering an "It's not you, it's me" speech, even saying, "Think of my wife!" But rather than this being the more typical sexual breakup, Bill Reardon has to fire his stenographer because of money, establishing the humorous reversals that will remain a theme throughout the film.

The high key stakes of antagonism and love is maintained throughout the film, without

ever being resolved or relaxed. But it is not exactly what Stanley Cavell would call a comedy of remarriage,<sup>2</sup> although in tone it shares much in common with these films. While this film has the tone of such frothy and escapist fantasies of wealth and ease, its content directly contradicts the joys of ease in favor of the fun of working together. The couple at the center is explicitly working class and more generally contentious than the films Cavell discusses. In addition, there is a deep current of violence that runs through the film. When we first see the Reardons together, they trade barbs, calling each other stupid, and he actually (teasingly, mostly) raises his hand as if to slap her, but never lets it fall. But there is something childlike about their interaction. What appears to be a battle of the sexes is instead a scrimmage where the seemingly opposing sides are really on the same team, merely honing their skills against one another. The central concern for the couple is not necessarily one of dominance, who is in charge, but rather how to make enough money to keep doing what they clearly enjoy doing.

The Reardons offer us our only successful couple in the film. Actually, they are the only couple at all. *The Thin Man* has a multitude of successful, unsuccessful, and potential couplings. This proliferation of comparisons serves to idealize and highlight the perfection of the couple of Nick and Nora. That is to say, the fact that they are successfully coupled becomes remarkable and notable. Nick is always talking about how he lucked out marrying Nora and their relationship is shown with a glamorous intimacy. In the Christmas morning scene, for example, she is in her present, a full length mink coat and he is shooting baubles off the tree with a peashooter as they banter and sip cocktails still in their night things.

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

*There's Always a Woman*, on the other hand, while referring to various couples within the film (and the murderous, gambling, and philandering instincts within them), does not show us these couples interacting together. Thus the Reardon's status as successfully married couple is both unremarked and shatteringly remarkable. Like Nick and Nora, they are different from the other characters, but their difference as a couple is less commented upon within the diegesis. Instead, the center of gravity for the conversation on difference falls almost solely on Sally. That is to say, the Reardon's marriage is not held up as an exemplar, but Sally is. She is remarkable ("What a Woman!"). She is not like other women, or anyone else really (as we will see during the interrogation scene). Whether this difference is due to the fact of her gender or her unique set of qualities, Sally is the focus of half admiring, half exasperated attention throughout the film. This shift of emphasis from the couple to the investigating woman disrupts the film's easy generic identity as a romantic comedy. Investigating becomes a *sign* of difference on the level of genre as well as character.

Sally Reardon launches into detective work as much out of a desire to further her husband's career rather than to satisfy her own inquisitive nature. She has "encouraged" him to leave the DA's office (where he worked as an investigator) to start his own business, and after a few months, they are not bringing in enough clients to sustain them. Her encouragement is shown to be ambiguous, part nagging scold and part supportive helpmeet. And the combination is in itself rather enlightening. Throughout this film, and the pleasure of it, there is a refusal to put Sally Reardon in a single box. She is both things: brilliant and idiotic.

Following Lisa Dresner's hypothesis of investigating women in film,<sup>3</sup> Sally is portrayed

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<sup>3</sup> See Dresner, *Female Investigator*.

as a crazy (if delightful) person: all of the characters treat her with caution and contempt. But Dresner's hypothesis does not account for Sally's real ability. They are cautious of her not only because she is unpredictable, but because she is so often correct. This duality, the divided response, this undecidability finally, marks the investigators within the Comedic mode. We will see the way undecidability marks the comedic investigative woman on the level of character, gender, star persona and genre. Undecidability is the defining characteristic of the woman in the Comedic mode.

## 4.2 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

*"Women who work in comedy are always already gender-inappropriate..."*<sup>4</sup>

Linda Mizejewski in her book *Hard-Boiled and High Heeled* offers three main ways that films make women detectives palatable: all of them circle around making her *more* feminized: "For a character as nonconformist as the woman detective—a woman whose story doesn't lead to love and marriage—the easiest way to assure the audiences she's straight is to glamorize her, give her a male cop partner, or put her into a bikini and high heels..."<sup>5</sup> One of the solutions that Mizejewski does not suggest is that you can make her funny. This is a difficult line to walk because there is still a deep-seated belief that women aren't funny. So the Comedic mode emerges from two impossibilities: women who want something that isn't marriage and are funny while they do it. This creates ideological anxieties that are dealt with through the generic solutions of romance

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<sup>4</sup> Rosie White, "Funny Women," *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol 10, No. 3, 2010. 357.

<sup>5</sup> Mizejewski, *Hardboiled and High Heeled*, 5.

and, more radically, of comedy.

In these films, the resolution of the mystery is not linked, structurally, to the resolution of the romance. The romance is either never really in question or never resolved. This is different from Rick Altman's thinking on the musical, which indeed does function like this. In a musical comedy the success of the show is explicitly linked to the success of the romance.<sup>6</sup> A woman who is purely a romantic partner cannot also be an investigating woman and vice-versa. They seem, at least on the surface to be competing drives. That is to say, traditionally the romantic woman is focused primarily on the romantic man. The focus is inward toward the couple and the concomitant social roles that that involves. As Kathrina Glitre notes in *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union 1934-65*, "Romance is rooted in gender inequality: from Petrarch to Freud, romantic love has traditionally been the privilege of the male subject; the woman can only desire to be desired, wanting to be swept off her feet by a tall, dark stranger."<sup>7</sup> Now to some degree the romantic comedies of the 30's (out of which tradition *There's Always a Woman* clearly emerges) propose a different kind of relationship between men and women, that is perhaps roomier, with more space for each individual, companionate. But this does not preclude romantic and sexual tension and even passion. Before marriage there is some attempt to tame the woman if the romantic element is highlighted, after marriage it is as if there is very little chance or point of effecting such a change.

Kendall credits Capra with inventing a whole new relationship between men and women in cinema in *Ladies of Leisure*: "This idea that the woman needs respect from the man before love

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<sup>6</sup> See Rick Altman's *American Film Musical*.

<sup>7</sup> Kathrina Glitre, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union 1934-65*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 61.

can happen—that love may depend on a climate of respect between a man and a woman—was entirely new to Hollywood. The late-twenties Cinderellas had wanted romance and wealth, not recognition of their personhood: they were content to be the pets of men they fell in love with.”<sup>8</sup> While this may be overstated, there is something crucial here, something that does transform with the coming of sound, a deeper ability towards characterization, and with this more complex relationships between men and women. But the investigating woman is always more than “pet,” always insists upon her personhood, a fact that is predicated by her ability to look, to reason, to deduce, to intuit: the very qualities that make a detective. In discussing Capra’s filmic background, Elizabeth Kendall explores his early work in the silent-comedy lots. Here, she writes, “The comedy teams went after “character” instead of “story line,” psychic insight instead of a moral lesson.”<sup>9</sup> It’s an intriguing line and I’m not totally sure what it means, but it has something to do with the relationship between the character in the script and the abilities and persona of the actor. And let us not forget Kendall’s kind of brilliant idea that “Romantic Comedy, in fact, can be defined as a cross between silent comedy and melodrama.”<sup>10</sup>

These films that rely on Romance reveal a complex negotiation: an insistence on personhood and at the same time an insistence on doing, on action. Mystery stories are stories motivated by plot structures. They have a definitive structure that must be met in order to qualify as a mystery. But this structure is the skeleton on which can be fleshed out in a variety of ways, moods, tones, and rhythms as has been worked through in the different modes of this study.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Kendall, *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 19.

<sup>9</sup> Kendall, *Runaway Bride*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Kendall, *Runaway Bride*, preface.

<sup>11</sup> This emerges out of a talk by Laurie King at Books, Inc in Berkeley, 5/18/2010.

Comedic mode features films that are structurally either classic (whodunit) mysteries or thrillers, but the Comedic mode moves them into different emotional registers. The thriller is most clearly linked to the classic melodrama and involves trying to stop something from happening; they are a race against time and the criminals. A crime must be prevented. Like the Adventurer, the Comedies operate in this almost preventative mode. The Comedies are implicated and imbricated in the crime itself. Either they are called in as a way to displace guilt or they are undercover and thus intimately involved in the crime.

Because they are comedies that feature women, they would seem to be romantic comedies, but they do not function like them. And yet they *feel* like them. One reason for this is that we so rarely see a woman-centered comedy that is not a Romantic Comedy. Only in the last couple of years with the success of such films as *Bridesmaids* (Feig, 2011) does the possibility seem to exist. There is a way that romance is seen as antithetical to detection: it makes you vulnerable because you want to protect the love object from the bad guys rather than pursuing the bad guys heedlessly and damn the consequences. At most, it can be an appropriate reward for a job well done, the final clinch clinches the film – a sign of the world restored to its axis.

The two sides of the character, the idiotic and the brilliant, the accidental and the purposeful, are mirrored in the two sides of the couple when there is one. Because the figure is “too much,” is excessive, and investigators in this mode always are “too much,” they are balanced out by the male counterpart. The male counterpart is not a dynamic character. While he might be unstable, he is not difficult to pin down. His outlines are clear. He is what he is. And he is masculine, attractive, and a solid experienced investigator. His presence defangs the ideological complications, in terms of genre. Her competence is due to him, at least on one level. His presence means that the film does not have to go out its way to explain her desire to investigate. Because it



is tied to the man, that is sufficient on the level of narrative.

The excess once again seems to lead us into melodrama. But there is a way that the addition of female gender, by itself, without any concomitant character traits or plot devices, is always and already “too much” and that is why we find ourselves returning again and again to the melodramatic mode. And perhaps it is that the detective always belongs there, by nature of the investigator’s generic workings. Certainly the detectives and investigators of *noir* are too much, are excessive. The reliance on misdirection and red herrings, on competing storylines and explanations for the same event place the detective genre into melodrama already. In fact, this study makes this fact clearer. It is easy to overlook the fact that detective stories are melodramas if they come across as male-centered action movies (although we’ve seen that this is certainly not proof against melodrama).<sup>12</sup> But because the excess seems to exist on the level of story, rather than emotion, mise-en-scene, or even action, the detective film does not seem to invite the appellation in the same way other types of genres do. If the genres are unexpected, the characters are undecideable.

But comedy is by its nature excessive. When we combine the excess of the character with the excess of story we get a great deal of excess with very little that seems to anchor it. The films are simply “too much” for the smooth working of a detective story. This is why the films featuring the crime-solving woman reach out to other generic structures. It wants the bolstering; it wants more structure. Like melodrama, comedy already functions in a key of “too much.” But this proliferation of genres is in itself another way these films are excessive.

So like the Adventurers, there exists in this modality a strategic move to humiliate the

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<sup>12</sup> See Linda Williams, “American Melodramatic Mode” and “Film Bodies”.

crime-solving woman. But the ways are more varied and the results are more mixed. In the Adventurer we kept seeing the move being made, and it was a broad stroke. There is no doubting the deliberate and inevitable motion, like tacking into the wind. We need only think of Captain Tweedy attacking Nancy Drew to picture the event. Broad, clear, obvious. Explicitly intended to put the detective off. And it never works. Here the move is more complicated. There is no outside single person telling her that she is an idiot. Rather, the events serve to humiliate her—the pratfall after the makeover, as if it is the tangling of her own self that causes the embarrassment, walking with two left feet. It is as if she, herself, were embarrassing, as much to others as to herself. When Gracie falls in *Miss Congeniality*, she pops back up, but everyone around her cringes for her.

Sometimes the investigation is merely the pretense for the romance. That is, the investigation has no interest on its own, but rather serves in the place of the escalating misunderstandings that are the normal stock in trade of the modern romcom. A film like *The Mad Miss Manton* (Leigh Jason, 1938) works this way. It is primarily about connecting the two disparate leads--wealthy socialite Melsa Manton (Barbara Stanwyck) with the hardboiled newspaper man Peter Ames (Henry Fonda)--and the investigation is no more important than the search for a missing intercostal clavicle in *Brining Up Baby*.

If the adventuring woman's ideological disruptions were managed by her token-ness and her not-quite-a-woman-ness, the Comedic's is ostensibly solved by a man. This is perhaps the most ideological palatable modality of the crime-solving woman, because her investigation mirrors a woman carefully choosing a mate, which is an appropriate and non-threatening kind of endeavor. But inevitably, when a woman is linked with men romantically and visually on the screen, the danger of her presence is mitigated, the anxiety of her active looking is allayed. Because of her linkage with a man, the anxiety of autonomy is displaced. It is no longer so forward in the action.

Even if she is still capable of autonomous action (and indeed all the figures in this mode remain so) because of the masculine co-presence on screen, it is as if he is able to shoulder some of the anxiety. By sharing screen space with a man with whom she is partnered (in whatever fashion), she is less threatening. She is not by herself or alone in a sea of men (inappropriate and unwomanly), but in a conventional set-up. This provides a cover (a disguise) for her more ideologically outrageous maneuvers. The couple provides a visual and generic anchor. However, this coupling is inherently unstable.

This level of difficulty can only be handled in the comedic. Anything else is too dangerous. These are heavy waters. This is not easy terrain to traverse. At stake is not only the idea of femininity, but the idea and necessity of heterosexual romance and pairing. The inherent problem with combining investigative plots with the romantic comedy is that for the romcom to work as its supposed to, *nothing* is as important as romance: “Subject matters are treated as trivial.”<sup>13</sup> Everything is subsumed before it. And in order for a detective narrative to work, there has to be a certain weight to the crime and the investigation that comedic romance dissipates. This is complicated further when the woman’s job is important, because the trajectory of the romcom is to get her married, to promote the value of relationships over everything else in her life, but most particularly her career. Romcoms depend on clichés, even more it seems than other genres.<sup>14</sup> Because the investigation is *more* important than the romance, the narrative questions the importance of the romance altogether. If the details of the narrative investigation get subsumed in

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<sup>13</sup> Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies*, (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Christina H, “6 Obnoxious Assumptions Hollywood Makes about Women” in *Cracked*, September 20, 2011. [http://www.cracked.com/blog/6-obnoxious-assumptions-hollywood-makes-about-women\\_p2/](http://www.cracked.com/blog/6-obnoxious-assumptions-hollywood-makes-about-women_p2/)

the romance, it is a factor of the stakes of the ideological investigation.

At the same time, this topsy-turvyness, this idea that something is more important than romance for a woman is the heart of the humor of these films. The idea that romance is not a woman's highest priority is itself too difficult to take seriously so it must be handled comedically. On the one hand, then, the romance is both a way of easing ideological tension and in itself a cause of those tensions. The need to have them coupled or partnered is to glue together the two sides, as if the split between the bickering couple is a mirror of the divided self of the investigator. The male side of these partnerships is not portrayed with this sort of ambiguity, by any means. He is a strong partner, the professional part of the couple, the solid part. It is the always the woman who is difficult to place.

The other ways this is dealt with is to have the character actually deal with an issue that is leading others to call her crazy: this results in what was a gap becoming a place of depth and character development to greater or lesser success. (Contemporary Movies do this a lot, and it can become its own short hand and cliché). But the idea that the woman is somehow incomplete or crazy is often at the heart of romantic comedies. And this is a more difficult idea to work through in film than simply beating up the woman enough until she finds her mate, thus the depressing state of romcom today, whose requirements seem to be that a woman must be humiliated enough to finally agree to settle for the schlubby man-child who can teach her to let loose and have some fun and in the process realize the value of family (cf. *Princess and the Frog*, *Knocked Up*, *Leap Year*, etc....) So how do we resolve the fact that it *feels* like a romantic comedy when structurally it does not *work* like one?

As with much of contemporary comedy, the investigators in the Comedic mode rely on the star personas of the actors. These star personas are highly unstable at the moment of the films I

discuss and the films do nothing to stabilize them. Instead the films seem to, not capitalize on, but feed the instability. It might be that when a studio does not know what to do with a comedic female star and romantic comedy, as such, is not an option (either because of gendered instability, or resistance on the part of the actor), it sticks her in a detective story. This holds true for Kathleen Turner as well as Bullock and Goldberg. We could even see Blondell's persona beginning to shift from the gold-digging musicals and gangster moll types to more "straight" comedy and melodrama that will define her later career (*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 1945). Christine Geraghty suggests in "Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Text, Bodies, and Performance" that the idea of stardom itself is inherently unstable, or rather that film studies interest in stars is *because* of the instability of meanings around them.<sup>15</sup> She wants to differentiate between different sorts of stardom and that they are not all unstable; some depend on stability.

The instability of the star persona reinforces the undecidability of the Comedic investigator. Films in the Comedic mode strongly depend on their stars. This is not unusual as many comedies depend of a single star (Eddie Murphy, Jim Carrey) but what is unusual is a comedy depending on a woman. What is unusual is a comedy depending on a woman that is not a romantic comedy. So the Comedic investigator is deeply linked (more than any other modality) the persona of the star.

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<sup>15</sup> Christine Geraghty, "Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Text, Bodies, and Performance" in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*. Eds. Sean Redmond and Su Homes. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 98.

### 4.3 *THERE'S ALWAYS A WOMAN: "IT'S THAT DUMB REARDON WOMAN!"*

Sally does not bend herself to her husband, Bill, at all in this movie. While at times he gets the upper hand, she does not give anything up. At the same time however, the whole trouble starts because she wants to help him retain his independence as an investigator rather than going back to work for the DA who takes all the credit for Bill's work. The premise itself is set upon a set of seeming contradictions: love and independence. This is a tension that remains throughout the film. Sometimes she is right and sometimes he is right, but there is no doubt of the love between them. There is no doubt that the two of them suit each other.<sup>16</sup> This film works because of Joan Blondell and because of the relationship between the Reardons.

The case begins after Bill Reardon has already left the office to take the job with the DA, leaving Sally alone to begin to pack up so they can vacate at the end of the month. As she is discontentedly beginning, in walks Lola Fraser (Mary Astor) who says she wants Reardon detective agency to tail her husband who she is worried is cheating on her, thus echoing the opening confusion where it sounds like Bill is cheating on Sally. Sally, as Agent 7, takes on the case. Lola tells her that they will all be at the Skyline Club that evening if she wants to get a look at the cast of characters, so when Bill offers to take her out in celebration of his new job, she suggests the club. He, of course, does not know her ulterior motives so her maneuvering is just wacky and inexplicable. But while there, she picks up some important clues—she gains some insight into the

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<sup>16</sup> And this is the problem with the next film the two are paired in, *The Amazing Mr. Williams*, where that very thing is in question and what follows is a series of terrible humiliations mostly for her character.

relationship between the two couples and she sees the suspected woman pass off a note to a gambler. The scene ends with the Reardons getting quite drunk on champagne together, the last ones in the club.

This rather elaborate sequence sets up some important elements both thematically and narratively. Women detectives investigate crimes around women. Much of what looks like craziness is in fact a process that the other people in the film simply aren't clued into. All of Sally's behavior, which without context just seems wacky and strange: eating when Bill wants to dance, dancing when Bill wants to eat, abruptly changing tables, getting so wrapped up in eavesdropping at the next table that she tips over backwards in her chair, all are logical behaviors in the context of her investigation.

However, while Sally is proved right, she is right for the wrong reasons. So we are split in our admiration for her. While we follow along her fearless and adventurous route, indeed as does her husband, and we can see that the case would not be solved without her, still we are asked to believe that she is wrong. Even when she is right, when she gets the correct criminal, when she gets the confession, still it is wrong. The frame itself here is extremely flimsy. We do not watch the film for anything other than Joan Blondell. In many ways Sally works like Gracie Allen, virtuositic word play that is supposed to be accidental or inadvertent. Yet, just as George Burns can trust Gracie to obliterate the door-to-door salesman, she is proved right. Too, there is a glorious full tilted focus on Joan Blondell as Sally, with rapid-fire delivery, perfect physical comedy backed by the blonde wide-eyed obliviousness. It is a marvelous performance.

In *There's Always a Woman*, the evolution occurs through Bill Reardon realizing, not his love for his wife, which is never in question, but her value—that she has instincts and abilities that he does not, that they work best as a team. When Bill, armed with a search warrant and

accompanied by a couple of cops, organizes a search of their apartment for a purloined letter that pertains to the case, Sally taunts him and the cops searching. She seems to enjoy every minute of playing with him: misdirecting, pretending that it is somewhere where it is not. And as he searches her, she exclaims loudly to the interest of the other two searchers. Even in his failure he is admiring of her success.

Throughout most of the picture he is working extremely hard to keep her off the case, to keep her in line, to keep her as a proper wife. All of these things Sally slips out of easily. She knows what she can do and what she wants to do. And if sometimes she overestimates her abilities, well, so does he. Does he love her *despite* of her interfering ways, or *because* of them? Does he love her despite the fact that she is different or because she is different. And it is that realization what the resolution hinges on? So the question becomes not “Does he love her, will their romance come to fruition?” but rather “why does he love her, and how will that effect the future?” And this is the story that any serial (whether television or film) hinges on. Sally Reardon drives the action rather than reacts to it. She is active not passive. Indeed, he reacts to her, following after her.

In *There's Always a Woman* the focus is squarely on “woman:” indeed there are a variety to choose from. The perpetrator is a woman (as in many mysteries where a woman solves the case). I have to admit that there is something incredibly satisfying in watching warm kooky Joan Blondell reel in her killer, the cold austere Mary Astor. It is a democratic triumph. And in fact it is this insistence on the working class that sets this film apart (and its alignment with the woman adds another intriguing layer). The cops in *The Thin Man* are galoots: bumbling, heavy-handed, and often wrong-headed. The cops in *Woman*, on the other hand, are good guys. And if they can't break Sally Reardon, as in the absolutely hilarious interrogation scene, well, no one could. Her qualities are almost entirely unknown. She is humming along to her own instincts that only have tangential



connection with the way the rest of the world does things. And she nabs the right person (if for the wrong reasons).

And here is the crux of the complication. Sally is our comic heroine. And she is remarkably successful. The events that might have been humiliating to another character she sails right through: she tips over in her chair at a fancy restaurant when she is attempting to eavesdrop on the conversation at the next table, a cop rifles through her underwear drawer and she plays a game of hot and cold with him, she gets arrested and undergoes hours of interrogation and she blithely files her nails and asks solicitously after her accusers, unruffled. But sometimes her lack of concern comes off as just dumb.

The question of her intelligence is raised over and over again throughout the film: it is never fully resolved but rather remains up in the air. This is a narrative element that we consistently see throughout representations of investigating women. In some intrinsic way, they are not whole. There is some hole or gap in them that needs to be filled. Usually by a man. Sometimes they accept this diagnosis and sometimes they do not, claiming status as a complete if flawed individual. This leads to claims like Lisa Dresner's in *The Investigating Woman* that all female detectives in film are "mad." She is right to point out that often, if not always, they are called or identified as mad by other characters in the movie. But this does not seem an adequate place to stop. Just because someone calls you crazy doesn't mean that you are, although if you hear it enough times, even the strongest minded might begin to doubt her sanity. The fact that this is a question that is brought to the surface of the text with an alarming degree of regularity is indeed problematic. The "craziness" marks a gap where a fully developed character should be. But if this does indeed happen, there are intriguing ways this is negotiated. And Sally Reardon demonstrates one of my favorites: to blithely ignore it and sail on unconcerned. Why would such a small-minded thought possibly matter to

her?

If Sally Reardon is impervious to outside influences, and certainly nothing seems to cool her, the more modern iteration is deeply susceptible to societal pressure. It's hard to imagine anyone giving Joan Blondell a makeover. But her star persona does not require one. She is kooky and difficult but decidedly feminine. When she shows her strength, it is decidedly feminine in nature. During her interrogation (which is organized by her husband as a technique to bring her to heel, or at least out of trouble for a bit) she is unconcerned with the seeming harshness of the circumstances. She takes the moment of enforced stillness to file her nails and helpfully tells the man who squeaks his chair repeated in order to raise the tension how to oil it.

The mystery in *There's Always a Woman* is a twisty one, in the early *noir* tradition of films like *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*. The inclusion of Mary Astor only serves to emphasize the resemblance. The semantic elements echoes those of the hard-boiled detectives: the working class milieu, concerns about making rent and having enough to pay for a dinner out, as well as its urban environment. While it is entirely shot in a studio, there are a couple of moments where there is an attempt to visually create city life, as when Sally escapes the cops searching her apartment and climbs down the fire escape, only to catch a lift from the local uniform to her next clue. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the film comes out of the hard-boiled tradition rather than imbricating it, perhaps uncomfortably, within a *noir* context. This is to say, that the screenwriters were clearly familiar with the kind of plots, language, characters, and situations that will inform *noir* while dramatically changing the mood, *noir* without *noir*. This relates to the difficulty in taxonomizing *Fargo*, with such terms as white *noir* and crime comedy.

#### 4.4 DON'T CALL ME BITCH: GENDER, RACE AND THE COMEDIC IN *FATAL BEAUTY*

*"[Whoopi Goldberg] continues to signify mostly "herself." Goldberg has acquired a curious status; she is charged in the popular imagination with representing a unique position. One of the best-paid women actors in Hollywood—for a moment, the best-paid—and certainly the highest-paid black woman in the movies, Goldberg stands apart for other reasons, too. Her early career as a stand-up comic may have prepared to operate as a kind of free-standing icon as well. Equally importantly, however, Goldberg is a figure who refuses to stay put, to stabilize her image...."*<sup>17</sup>

*Fatal Beauty* (Tom Holland, 1987) is only a comedy for lack of a better term. Understood at the time as a sort of *Beverly Hills Cop* reboot,<sup>18</sup> reviewers struggled with how to understand the film and its star Whoopi Goldberg. Goldberg's status as a star is still unsettled at this moment and yet the film clearly functions as a vehicle for her. The uncertainty around her is manifested throughout the film. 1987, the year of the film's release, puts Goldberg between her breakout performance in *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985) and her Academy Award winning role in *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990). This period was marked for Goldberg by a series of crime films, *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (Penny Marshall, 1986)<sup>19</sup> and *Burglar* (Hugh Wilson, 1987). While Goldberg's characters solve crimes in all three films, she is explicitly a detective in *Fatal Beauty*. Clearly there is something about this role that producers felt suited Goldberg. While her dramatic performance in *the Color Purple* was

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<sup>17</sup> Sharon Willis, "Race on the Road: Crossover Dreams," in *The Road Movie Book* ed. Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 295.

<sup>18</sup> See Janet Maslin, October 30, 1987 *Fatal Beauty* review *New York Times* (<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B0DE4D91F38F933A05753C1A961948260>) or David Kehr, October 30, 1987 *Fatal Beauty* review *Chicago Tribune*, "**Fatal Beauty` Casts Another Veil Over Whoopi Goldberg**".

<sup>19</sup> *Jumpin' Jack Flash* also marked Penny Marshall's directorial debut.

widely lauded, she was also known as a comedian, especially with the broadcast of *Comic Relief* in 1986 and its sequels. In a fascinating turn, Goldberg won the NAACP Image Award for Best Actress for her turn in *Fatal Beauty* following her '85 win for *The Color Purple*.

*Fatal Beauty* did acceptable but not notable box office: it grossed over twelve million, nothing to the \$234,760,500 that *Beverly Hills Cop* reeled in, but something rather in the middle of the year's releases (number 83 out of 238 charted on Box Office Mojo), beating Madonna's '87 vehicle, *Who's That Girl* with grosses of \$7,305,209 and coming in just under bratpackers *The Pick-Up Artist* and *Less than Zero*. *Three Men and a Baby*, *Fatal Attraction* and *Beverly Hills Cop II* were the top grossing films of the year.

The film itself is extremely violent, littered with extended shootouts and filled with sexist and racist bad guys who are not afraid to express their views. Seen 25 years later, it is difficult to understand what was supposed to be funny about the film. What does hold up is Rizzoli/Goldberg's insouciance in the face of such epithets and sexual threats (she is threatened with rape multiple times in the film in addition to being called "nigger," "cunt," "bitch," "dusky dick," "puta"). The comedy rests on the back of her return fire quips that question the masculinity of every man who threatens her. In addition, Rizzoli has an array of disguises that allow Goldberg to perform characters familiar to fans of her standup.

Goldberg's in-between status is marked by being one of the very few black women comedians to find a large white audience, sharing the stage with Robin Williams and Billy Crystal as co-hosts of *Comic Relief* in 1986 and hosting the Academy awards four times. In *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, Bambi Haggins devotes a chapter to Whoopi Goldberg: "Crossover Diva: Whoopi Goldberg and Persona Politics." She writes, "Goldberg's career navigates crossover waters by mobilizing multiple persona...[however] the

many facets of Whoopi often seem at war with each other—particularly in relationship to her comedic work.”<sup>20</sup> This instability, this war is exactly what is highlighted by *Fatal Beauty* and in turn illustrates the complication of the Star Persona in the Comedic mode. With Goldberg then you’ve got this series of disjunctions: comedic/dramatic, black/white, feminine/masculine, straight/queer. In *Fatal Beauty* these are negotiated in a variety of ways with more and less success. Ironically, it is the romance in *Fatal Beauty* that is the source of much of the anxiety. Because Goldberg is already funny and not-woman not to mention non-white, her character’s love affair with a criminal and a white man had to be erased. This is curious because in just a few years (1998) Soderbergh will make a film about this. *Out of Sight* features Jennifer Lopez as a US Marshall and George Clooney as the criminal she’s chasing literally and romantically. But their racialized difference is both eroticized, (Lopez and Clooney appear as straight and hot) and the fact that she is Latina is often repackaged so Lopez can be seen as whiter to an overly white audience.

The theatrical trailer of *Fatal Beauty* begins with electronic piano music and night shots of LA clearly meant to evoke *Beverly Hills Cop* in feel, and indeed was scored by the same person.<sup>21</sup> The voiceover, drawled and lingered over in a sort of movie voiceover ecstasy, is interspersed with clips from the movie:

L.A.  
Lots of ways a girl can get into trouble  
and the surest way is to be a lady cop,  
but she’s no lady.  
This is Whoopi.  
She’s got the moves  
She’s got the mouth  
She’s got the badge

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<sup>20</sup> Bambi Higgins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 132.

<sup>21</sup>Harold Faltermeyer. And *Beverly Hills Cop 2* came out earlier the same year (1987).

But she's got to have *his* help  
To stop a killer  
Whoopi Goldberg  
Sam Elliot  
*Fatal Beauty*

It is worth it to parse the trailer for a moment. The protagonist's gender is emphasized: "girl," "lady," the repetition of "she," and the fact that she needs a man's help to do her job. But Goldberg's star persona is put in direct opposition to these terms. She's no lady: she's Whoopi. She is not a named protagonist; she is Whoopi. The contradictions of the film are encapsulated in this 90 second trailer: the gendered ambiguity that Goldberg embodies, the collapse between star and character, and as we see throughout this study, the particular investigating woman is set up in contrast to the *rest* of the females on the planet. She is different. She is singular. She is herself a contradiction.

The LA of *Fatal Beauty* is something of a dystopic one, crowded with hookers and the homeless. The film opens with Goldberg striding down the sidewalk in a weird sort of hooker drag. Our first vision is of her red sequined heels. She is wearing a huge long curly blonde wig, enormous white sunglasses, a tiny yellow dress with a zipper that runs from hem to navel and a sort of animal print lame jacket over top (Whoopi will reprise this particular costuming mode in *Sister Act*). As she walks, we hear comments and catcalls from hookers and dealers alike. It is impossible to tell if they are teasing her (in a friendly way), mocking her, or coming on to her, but none of it slows her down. While the camera certainly examines her, it displaces all of the overt sexuality onto the other prostitutes on the street with lingering shots of women bent over with their head in a car window in hot pants, or leaning over and spilling out of the tops of their shirts. The sound track sings, "Pretty, pretty, pretty. Oh, pretty what's your name?"

She walks into a strip club. She comments on the dancer in tassels and a garter belt with a confident combination of admiration, solidarity, and insouciance: This is her world. Ordering a drink at the bar, she has a weirdly racist interaction as part of her character with the bartender played by Cheech Marin and gets picked up by a cowboy, an exchange that ends with, "I'm gonna cut your dick off." As the cowboy attempts to pick her up we cut to two men listening on headphones. We immediately understand that they are cops. The younger one exclaims, "That John's gonna blow the bust!" The other, older cop calmly replies, "Relax kid, she'll get rid of him." This exchange, in conjunction with her quick wit and repartee (even if, or because, it is wildly offensive), establishes her competency and mastery. That is, we explicitly understand that she is in a costume, a disguise, a performance and she is in control of it.

When her connection arrives, an insanely coiffed queen with Little Lord Fauntleroy curls and furs, she begins negotiating a drug deal. Mid conversation, she sees a scuffle, a man dragging a woman out yelling imprecations. She yells at him for him to keep it down, and he yells back, "Back off bitch!" When it becomes clear that no one is going to do anything about this ("I mind my own business, lady"), Goldberg follows after. Pointing a gun at the man beating up the woman, she says, "I think that's enough." He throws the girl at Goldberg, knocking them both down. "Wanna bet, nigger? Get your black ass back to Africa." He then kicks her repeatedly, calling her "nigger" several more times. Her purse has fallen open with the cash lying in the street. She murmurs in a much lower-pitched voice than we have heard her use, "Police Officer down." The drug dealer has followed her out and hears this and runs. Some gang kid grabs the money on the street and runs. The abused hooker jumps on the pimp, which gives Goldberg some breathing room. The pimp turns and does some sort of action star roll coming up with a run shooting at

Goldberg. But she is not there, but behind him and she shoots him in the chest, “Don’t call me bitch.” Belatedly, the guys from the van run into the alley.

From the beginning, this sort of performed exaggerated femininity is read as comic, as unnatural and in contrast to her “natural” state as cop. The fact that her real self is the cop is perhaps the most interesting thing about the movie. There is no attempt to cure her of the investigative drive, nor doubt cast as to the value of her work. She has the typical (male) antagonistic relationship with her chief who chews her out over the bust gone awry. Her costuming runs to sweatshirt, jeans and sneakers. But he doesn’t treat her differently because of her gender. She drives a classic car. In fact, she is treated more like a “regular” detective than any other investigator in this study, which makes the other issues about the way femininity is performed at play in the film other than genre more notable.

What are we supposed to understand from this opening sequence? What are the priorities of the film, what are its political alignments? Would it even make sense to think of it as a feminist film? As an anti-racist film? As a film with progressive attitudes towards sex workers? Or one with a great deal of sympathy for addicts? I think we certainly can understand this film as occupying a space of neo-liberal and very 80s values.

All of the characters who are explicitly racist are cast as bad: either deserving of death like the pimp, or simply stupid like a fellow detective is portrayed. Indeed, the film offers a remarkably multi-ethnic cast. In addition to Goldberg, her fellow detectives are Latino (Ruben Blades) and Japanese, (Steve Akahoshi). All of the bad guys (and this is not a subtle picture) are white. The drug dealers are white. Most of the users are white. The villains are cast as unremittingly evil and megalomaniacal. As are all the other antagonist cops, who make jokes about her being a maid, that she can’t pay her bets with food stamps, picking up sailors, and explicitly, calling her “Our dusky



little dick”, and when she is actually investigating, making a comment about “doggie style” as she looks underneath a van. She is able to deflect all of these slurs with ease and confidence. In fact, this ability is one of the primary ways in which she demonstrates her mastery. But it has got to get you down after a while. Her mastery takes structural racism off the hook. If this tough black woman, with her personal history, in her tough job can easily deflect the problems of race in her world, than the problems of race are clearly not structural but only personal.

The way that the films deals with race is a sort of reversal to how films featuring a woman detective deal with gender. Typically, we get the pleasure of watching a woman be dominant and active for the bulk of the movie, only to have her be ideologically re-bound at the end of the film. So the tension lies between our (feminist) pleasure in her activity and our (patriarchal) comfort in keeping her in a familiar place. In this film, we get the anti-racist pleasures of watching people of color in positions of authority on the side of good and getting it over on the racists in the world, but we still get the colonialist comforts of hearing all the assumptions and epithets spoken aloud and made visible.

The film’s address of race certainly is not unproblematic. There is a sequence when a huge black man, hopped up on the deadly drug Fatal Beauty, is shot numerous times and won’t go down. All the white cops watch him lumber around like an ox in amazement activating a terrible and long-lived racist concept of black men as less than human. On the other hand, a gag occurs when an old grandmother is speaking rapid fire Chinese to an Asian cop. The white cop asks, “What’d she say?” And he responds, “I have no idea. I told you I was Japanese.” As opposed to the earlier example, this joke is not on the Asian cop, but on the white one.

Goldberg’s exaggerated performance of femininity draws attention to itself in a way that her performance of race remains invisible, or at least unspeakable. Her undercover performances

always have an element of exaggerated sexuality (as a hooker, as a sweet southern church girl ripe for seduction) that invite us to think about the intersection of black womanhood and the explicitly sexualized performance. The criminals she interacts on a sexual level with are all white. But we are supposed to notice the sex and ignore the race. It is only when she is in her “natural” state as detective, not in her sexualized undercover state, that Rizzoli is called racial epithets. That is, it is only when she is explicitly unsexualized that her blackness is visible within the world of the film. As we saw in the opening sequences, it is only when she pulls her gun and uses her natural voice and stance that the insults hurled at her move from misogynist to racist. And it is at this place, as we will see, that she re-feminized by the film.

Both qualities (woman, black) are seen as performative. As Rizzoli leaves her house one evening, dressed in an ill-fitting striped shirtwaist dress with crinoline, buttoned to the neck and pearls, Marshack is waiting for her. “Mr. Krull sent me. To look after ya. He wants to make sure nothing happens to ya.” She rather tiredly assures him that nothing is going to happen to her. “You and I both know that, but the guys who pays my salary wants to be sure.” When she says she is going on a date he laughs at her, “You’re probably undercover, or you got shitty taste.” She calmly shoots out his tires to prevent him from following her. We get a repetition of the opening scene, but this time in a decidedly better part of town. But again she clumps down the street like a man in drag. When she meets up with her partner, he doesn’t even seem to recognize her at first. What is fascinating is that we never witness the transformation, either into or out of femininity. We never get the pleasures of her closet, full of possibilities and identities. We never see her in between. This would be an easy, and typical way to sexualize her. But we never see in her any sort of state of undress.

With her pants suits and sneakers and a seeming resistance to male eroticization, Whoopi Goldberg invites a queer reading. This renders her romance with Sam Elliot's Marshak even more problematic. So the question becomes, how is Rita Rizzoli rendered feminine? Is the film's lack of success in rendering this what makes the film so lumpy and problematic? Is the problem of making visible the romance between Marshak and Rizzoli, between Goldberg and Elliot, a problem of race or a problem of gender performance?

Marshak's courtship of her accounts for her power and her femininity. He does not buy into her performances of femininity, acknowledges her ability to take care of herself, but when she is wounded in the hospital, brings her a gift of a dress she was admiring in a store window that costs five thousand dollars. When he gives it to her, she is in the hospital dressed in an oversized matching shirt and jeans and a shoulder holster. She is the voice of moral authority. You've got to give Marshak some credit. He continues to pursue her even after she calls him an asshole and a coward. Even her ethnicity is unstable with the explicitly Italian name, Rita Rizzoli and curiously, reference to it is left in the film not incidentally at a moment of flirtation between her and Sam Elliot's character, Marshak. He looks her over and tells her how much he has always liked Italian girls. As if even in 1987, attraction between a white man and a black woman must remain heavily coded. This is reinforced later in the film when she asks him: "How do you take your coffee?"

"Black." A beat. They each have a little smile. "Oh."

This insistence on her femininity, on her inherent womanhood despite the fact that when not in disguise her appearance is quite androgynous, is performed in several ways, all of them troubling the skin of the film. One most evident way is her romance with Mike Marshak (Sam Elliott). The interracial aspect is both apparent in Elliott's Marlboro man masculinity and excised

from the film. The love scene was apparently cut because it didn't test well leaving us with only an absence, as Rizzoli calls for Mike from the shower in the morning (clearly implying that he spent the night) and one lingering kiss. But the romance is complicated by the fact that he is working for a drug kingpin. So as he is getting wheeled into the ambulance, and from there into jail, they kiss. She says she will wait for him. But his boss's criminal activities put the kibosh on more than a one-night stand. The film simultaneously proposes and denies the possibility of their romance.

It is a comedy, in the sense that it operates off of Goldberg's comedic persona, with the exception of this one critical dramatic scene that we will look at in more detail. This scene serves to highlight her femininity through the story of her drug use and the death of her child. That is, through failed motherhood. But it is also a stereotypically black narrative of the crack epidemic. This has the added benefit of explaining her drive, ambition, violence and anger all in a non-threatening way. When she gets the news that Fatal Beauty has killed 4 little kids, "8, 9, 10 and 12," she freaks out. Marshack tries to tell her she cannot hold herself responsible for everything that happens. She responds with the seeming non-sequiter: "I was not a pretty kid. And I knew that. And my mother knew that." She then tells the story of getting pregnant at fourteen from a guy who went out with her on a dare. And then she got into drugs. This entire sequence is told into stable two shots. The camera doesn't move in direct contrast to the active camera of the rest of the film. Her daughter got into her stash and died. Now she extends her regret and feeling of responsibility into her desire to protect all the kids. She weeps and Marshack holds her.

This scene functions in melodramatic excess to the rest of the filmic text in addition to being a moment of excessive performance. The quality of the performance is of a very high quality that the rest of the film does not demand, instead relying on Goldberg's recognizable comic shtick.

What is intriguing here is both its excessiveness and the fact that it is the only explanation offered for why she is the way she is. The rest of the film offers no clues, and the rest of the text offers no explanation. This scene also leads to the erased moment of sexuality.

The confession sequence fades and cuts to exterior day shot. We hear the phone ring and hear the shower run. From the shower Rizzoli calls, “Marshack! Wohoo. Could you get the phone for me please?” The call goes to the machine and we see her in a robe looking for him, with a definitive shot at the rumpled bed. The clear intimation is that Marshak and Rizzoli had sex the night before and he bolted when she was in the shower. But we do not see any of this. We do not even see them kiss or walk into the bedroom. The fact that this is not shown is noteworthy. Typically detective movies of this moment have a great deal of gratuitous, frequently plot-stopping sex. This was a sexual encounter that is firmly motivated by the story, that is crucial to our understanding of the relationship between the two main characters and we don’t see any of it. It is cut out of the film. It certainly wasn’t for ratings purposes as the violence, language and drug-use clearly mark it as rated-R. Instead, we must read its exclusion as a discomfort with the image of Goldberg and Elliot. We can allude to the idea, but the actual image is problematic to the film and thus cut away. At the very end of the film, after she has single-handedly defeated the bad guys, that we see them linked sexually. As he is being wheeled into an ambulance (he has been injured in the final shootout), and after the hospital is bound for jail due to the fact that he worked for a gangster, she kisses him. It is a lovely tender kiss that speaks to her feelings and their relationship. She tells him everything will be fine and we get a freeze frame on her face. It is only when the possibility of their actual romance is made *impossible* that we are allowed a glimpse of what it might look like. But only for an instant and then we are left with the image of Goldberg alone.

*Fatal Beauty* marks the beginning of a shift. The contemporary moment is littered with women detectives on our television screen. Even in film, we are seeing more and more female detectives we are seeing fewer male detectives. It is currently out of fashion. The current ones tend to be buddy films, (interracial or intergenerational) and played for laughs. The reach of *48 Hours* is long. And indeed, Philippa Gates argues that the woman has taken the role of the buddy in these films:

It is this last point that is most likely the motive for the current trend of serial killer films starring female detectives. The younger white male detective gave way to the African-American male and older detectives and now to the young, white, female detective. While this would suggest that the genre is attempting to offer a feminist message, as Barry Keith Grant argues, film's presentation of black, female, or gay characters is often merely a substitution for the white, male hero and does "little or nothing to challenge the sexist or racist assumptions that inform the myths by which they operate."<sup>22</sup>

*Fatal Beauty*, intriguingly, seems to run quite smoothly as a detective film of its moment. What about Whoopi Goldberg makes that possible? Where do the disruptions appear, if not on the order of genre?

In critic Dave Kehr's contemporaneous review of *Fatal Beauty*, he begins with the following rumination: "Who is Whoopi Goldberg? Or, more to the point, what is Whoopi Goldberg? Steven Spielberg's "The Color Purple" made her a star, but she still hasn't found an identity-she seems, in fact, intent on erasing whatever identity she has."<sup>23</sup> The denial of articulated identity and even personhood ("what" instead of "who") is linked with both an insistence and denial of Goldberg's femininity. The review ends with the following thought:

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<sup>22</sup> Gates, "Manhunting."

<sup>23</sup> Dave Kehr, "Fatal Beauty Casts Another Veil over Whoopi Goldberg," *Chicago Tribune*, 10/30/87. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-10-30/entertainment/8703210902\\_1\\_goldberg-the-fatal-beauty-dean-riesner](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-10-30/entertainment/8703210902_1_goldberg-the-fatal-beauty-dean-riesner)

If there is some progressive element to this-the spectacle of a woman taking over a man's role, of tables being turned-the filmmakers do their best to squash it. There's a protective male hovering around Goldberg (Sam Elliott, a stylishly graying Marlboro Man), who steps in when he's really needed; and Goldberg's ambiguous sexuality is used throughout the film as an alibi: She may be a woman, but (except when she's in disguise) she doesn't look like one or act like one. The film creates a notion of feminism that the male action audience can accept without feeling threatened-a feminism without the feminine.<sup>24</sup>

Her sexuality is not only "ambiguous" but her sex is conditional, "she may be a woman." It is not only that she lacks femininity, she is not feminine and by extension, hardly a woman at all. This is a comment not only about her character, but about the way the film functions: it is as straightforward of a detective story as any we have seen in this study. It is not on the level, then, of genre, that this film is disruptive, but on the level of gender. At the same time, we do get to enjoy her mastery and success. We enjoy her fooling misogynist criminals and beating up racists.

It is not incidental that "not-quite a woman" is exactly the turn of phrase the Tania Modleski picks up for her (early) meditation on post-feminism, *Feminism without Women*. She spends some time thinking about the difficulty of Goldberg. She articulates exactly what is at stake for the female detective: "The black woman is seen either as too literally a woman (reduced to her biology and her biological functions) or in crucial ways not really a woman at all."<sup>25</sup> In a crucial way, Whoopi Goldberg in *Fatal Beauty* encapsulates the inherent ideological struggle at the heart of the female detective. I certainly don't want to erase race here. The film both highlights and disguises race in obvious and interesting ways. Issues of gender seem to loom larger for the character of Rita Rizzoli, "Don't Call Me Bitch," but there is fierce irony to this portrayal and the way the possibility

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<sup>24</sup> Kehr, "Fatal Beauty."

<sup>25</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 133.

of mixed race romance is both approached and disavowed. But I think denying her femininity is only part of the story. There is a very strong way that the film is trying to position her sexuality that Goldberg resists. Her resistance is because she does not come across as hetero-normative. Rather, her entire persona reads queerly, as black lesbian. So her performance of exaggerated racialized sexuality is perhaps her own joke, an inside joke to those who don't quite align with the patriarchal structures of 80s Hollywood. It escapes the confines of the film.

#### **4.5 MISS CONGENIALITY: FEMINISTS.**

##### **INTELLECTUALS. UGLY WOMEN**

*You know, I've been fighting all my life against your type. The ones who think we are just a bunch of worthless airheads. You know who I mean. Feminists. Intellectuals. Ugly women. But I refuse to give into their cynicism.*

–Karen Morningside in *Miss Congeniality*

The female investigator in the Comedic mode is undecidable and divided. This is her strength and her weakness as an investigator and the core conflict from which the humor of the film emerges. Gracie Hart in *Miss Congeniality* (Donald Petrie, 2000) gives off extremely mixed gender signals, as all the characters around her make clear. There is no actual ambiguity of her gender, but she is inappropriate. As a fellow agent tells her when she asks, “Is it because I’m a woman?,” “None of us think of you like that.” What exactly “that” is, is open to interpretation. Is “that” simply as female? Or is “that” romantically or attractive? But if she is not really woman, nor is she a man. She is dismissed because she is female and dismissed again because she is not woman enough. The plot of the film follows the humorous attempt to situate her within femininity without the attempt ever being fully successful. Gracie does learn the *power* of femininity, which she may now



chose to use in an apotheosis of post-feminism. But we must also ask what exactly this femininity looks like. *Miss Congeniality* is not just the story of Gracie Hart learning how to be feminine; it is also the story of her coming of age as a person and as a detective and the story of an investigation. The way these stories are intertwined and work with and against each other will allow us to examine the way the investigator functions within the Comedic mode.

The film opens with a shot of a playground. A subtitle helpfully informs us that it is New Jersey, 1982. As the camera pans around the playground full of active children, it pauses on a little girl reading a Nancy Drew novel, *The Invisible Intruder*, its yellow binding a speaking viscerally and immediately to a certain set of girls who read Nancy Drew in playgrounds. We hear the sound of a children's argument and she pulls the books away from her face to reveal two braids, glasses and a boys t-shirt. From her point of view, she sees a couple of boys bullying a smaller boy. She walks over, "Problem, gentlemen?" The bully replies, "Dorkbrain. If you weren't a girl, I'd beat your face off." She replies, "Yeah? If *you* weren't a girl, I'd beat *your* face off." "Are you calling me a girl?" "You called me one!" "Oh, you're asking for it," the bully says and takes a swing at her, his victim forgotten. Ducking so he hits the wooden post behind her, she stomps on his foot and delivers a swift punch to the nose that downs him. As she helps the erstwhile victim collect his scattered homework, she professes her affection to which he responds, "Now everyone thinks I need a girl to protect me. You really are a dorkbrain." Angered and hurt, she punches *him* in the nose. It's a swift two minute opening before the credits and yet it articulates quite precisely the issues that the film will navigate: the unattractiveness of violent females. The camera closes in her face in glasses as the title rolls and we cut to the same shot of Sandra Bullock in similar dark framed glasses. Instead of a Nancy Drew, she is ostensibly reading a book of Russian grammar, but the book is in fact a recording device. She is on the job.

As in *Fatal Beauty*, we understand immediately that Gracie is part of some sort of surveillance operation. This one, however, is larger and she is a smaller part. There are none of the assurances from the other members of the team that she has it all under control, as we saw in the earlier film. The focus is very much on the men under investigation rather than on Gracie, although she is visible in the background of the shot over the shoulder of the one of the three men they are watching. As the exchange for which the police were looking is about to happen (they need to capture the transfer of disks), a matronly waitress steps between Gracie and the Russians to clear a table. The observers in the car comment on the woman's body. "Ah jeez, this woman's ass is in the way...this broad has two asses." And it is up to Hart to do something. And she quite cleverly does. Having captured the image, the rest of the team moves in. And again, as in *Fatal Beauty*, Hart compromises the mission through a sort of misplaced sympathy. One of the Russians is choking on a peanut. Her commander tells her to stay still, but she insists, gives the guy the Heimlich maneuver, pushes him down to put him in cuffs, only to have a knife put to her own throat. In the scrum that follows, one of the other agents is shot. In the aftermath, as the ambulance drives away and the witnesses are being interviewed she has a brief conversation with Agent Matthews (Benjamin Bratt) (who we have just heard praised for his actions). She regrets not following orders and feels responsible for her fellow agent getting shot. Matthews replies. "You made a choice. It was wrong, but that's it. It's over. And by the way, you look like hell." In this, the end of the first sequence we see of her as an adult, we see the conflicts established in the prologue being developed: a sort of disgust of aggressive females, of showing that an aggressive female is unattractive and this matters. A woman's attractiveness matters. It matters more than her ability to do her job, to follow orders, to make choices. The choice doesn't matter, looking like hell does.

She is a tomboy, naturally, and is shown both defending those weaker than her, and being quick to anger in defense of herself. If some other boy had said that to some other girl, and Gracie had punched him out, we would not have had the same instinct to call her angry. This incident prepares us to find her immature and infantile in the next scene, especially as she has the same hair style (braids) in the raid on the Russian mafia twenty-five years later. However, there is another way to read the scene in light of all the manipulation of Gracie: her characteristics are innate. This is also the very point when the queer reading begins. Her nature is thus both immature, innate, and not properly feminized. Her butchness is a sign of an underdeveloped maturity. She is arrested at this moment of pre-adolescence.

The comparison to *Fatal Beauty* is an instructive one. The opening of *Fatal Beauty* shows a protagonist in control: of her image (even as it is excessive), her language (again, excessive) and her behavior. She makes choices and she defends them, asserting that the prostitute she defended at the expense of the sting was important. She insists that what she did was right and it mattered. There is a clear distinction between her undercover look and her “regular” look, but the men working with her respect her. Even the dressing down she receives from her boss is one we’ve seen Starsky and Hutch receive a million times. Our introduction to Gracie on the other hand, shows her as a child, making wrong decisions and continues into the present of the film, still making the same sort of wrong choices. This is made clear not only through her actions but her outward appearance is a sign of her inability to make correct choices. She “looks like hell,” and it is impossible to tell whether that is the cause or the result of her bad choices. But the two are clearly linked. Femaleness is oriented with a negative series of binaries from the very first moments, from using “girl” as an insult, to the unruly body of the waitress that interferes with the very important work the agents are doing, even though she is *also* doing her job. This insistence

on the correlation of femaleness and wrongness is clearly the thing that needs to be resolved. And this issue is clearly not the domain of the detective story: we need recourse to other generic structures to address it.

Ebert dismisses *Miss Congeniality* as fluff or rather as tired and familiar. He focuses on the fact of the transformation, the makeover part almost to the exclusion of the investigative part.<sup>26</sup> And he's not wrong. The fact that the mystery is telegraphed from a million miles away, that in fact there *is* no mystery, nothing to detect, is yet another way the female detective is undercut. That the solution is obvious that even the viewer most unfamiliar with the tropes of the detective genre can see it coming from a million miles away shows a distinct lack of faith in the woman detective and her audience. If the detective narrative is so dismissed, so underdeveloped, so cursory, do we have to pay attention to it? Or rather, what does this plotline, this figure, offer that this is where they place their makeover? All makeover films take as their subject female roles. What does it mean to be female, to be feminine, and can anyone join?

If Grace is not explicitly feminized because she is portrayed as unattractive (reiterating the clear correlation between proper femininity and attractiveness), she is feminized through the way the other characters treat her. She is sent out for coffee for the entire office. She treats it like any other case. She is overlooked for a promotion and men take her ideas without acknowledgment. When she comes up with the same answer on her own that a team of intelligencers "downstairs" does, no one acknowledges it.

Gracie is the only woman present as the agents attempt to find a field agent who could infiltrate the Miss United States beauty pageant. The frat boy atmosphere of the team when they

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<sup>26</sup> December 22, 2000. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/miss-congeniality-2000>

are digitally stripping all the potential agents is disturbing. A computer program transforms the female agents from their seemingly regulation black pants suits to either a one-piece bathing suit or a pageant worthy dress (the way the computer can tell what lies beneath the clothes is uncanny). Each bared body is then subject to commentary: mostly booing and the throwing of junk food at the computer screen. Every female field agent is subjected to the treatment before the group moves on to Agent Roberts and the chief himself. Somehow it does not occur to anyone until they have reached the end of possibilities that Gracie is a match: female, under 35 and not pregnant. Her lack of femininity renders her invisible. And being female is the only prerequisite this case requires.

Hollywood cinema tries to elide any difference between a woman's appearance and her identity. But just as makeover films draw attention to the performance of femininity, so to do these films draw attention to the disjunction between appearance and identity. Their ideological resolution is dependent on getting the two into alignment in order to erase the question they raise.

Structurally, *Miss Congeniality* depends on the suspense story more than the detective story. Or rather, once Gracie Hart becomes fully immersed in the feminized world of the pageant, the structure shifts. We move from investigating what has already happened (the central construct of the detective story) to preventing what might happen (the suspense story).<sup>27</sup> Someone has sent a series of bomb threats to the Miss United States competition and the potential bomber called The Citizen must be found out and neutralized before he (or she) can strike. While there is the implication that The Citizen has acted before, we never hear precisely what has happened. The past does not exist in this film. The investigation of a potential crime, moving toward the future,

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<sup>27</sup> See David Bordwell, "Murder Culture: Adventures in 1940s Suspense," in *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, March, 2013.

<http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/murder.php>

helps keep the tone comedic. Nothing bad has happened yet, but the actual feeling of suspense, of fear, on which the suspense story depends for its tensions, is dispersed into the fascination of watching Gracie perform and in some ways become Miss New Jersey. The question shifts from will she catch the bomber to will she pass as a pageant contestant.

What effect does the makeover have on the detective genre? It takes away from the feeling of integrity of the detective. They are not whole in the same way as a male detective. They lack. We have no reason to offer them out faith in their abilities, as they need someone else to come and make them over. But it also gives us faith in their dedication to their task. Their willingness to be transformed, to become different is a sign of their tenacity, of how willing they are to “get their man.” Of course, especially in this modality, there is the very difficulty of that phrase.

Gracie’s makeover occupies a quite complex middle space. While it does provide us with the frothy pleasures of vicarious consumerism, much as the screwball comedies offered its audiences with a glimpse of luxury during the depression, it is also, explicitly, a disguise, making feminine performance, at least the kind of outsized femininity demanded by beauty contests, denaturalized. It is hard work and as important as the other elements of the investigation although no one else seems to agree with that assessment.

Mizejewski claims that if it’s all a fairytale, at least it’s better than *Pretty Woman*, ending with more adventures rather than a marriage.<sup>28</sup> But that’s a pretty lukewarm ambition. And by evoking the makeover, one is evoking *Pretty Woman*. It is just the way it remains, even 20 years later. The Makeover film has become something of a genre in itself, with its own rules and recognizable elements. It is not a new one: *Now, Voyager* (Rapper, 1942) set many of the

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<sup>28</sup> Mizejewski, *Hardboiled and High-Heeled*, 167-8.

conventions in place. And like Charlotte Vane, Gracie Hart's transformation is orchestrated by a man and resisted by its subject. Being "feminine" in the way proscribed by the makeover makes them both feel naked, neither is it an end in itself (unlike say *Pretty Woman*, where the makeover revealed her true self both to herself and to her lover). Charlotte's makeover is explicitly a therapeutic venture. And of course the purpose of Gracie's is to go undercover. What we do not see is the pleasure, the joy of shopping and beautiful clothes or the moment when she is revealed to herself. Her revelation is a public one. It is explicitly not about transformation, but about performance. The need for a makeover, the fact that a woman is not performing properly but has some hidden potential is a way of exhibiting the divided, undecideable self. But this makeover is not *about* the woman. It is not for her or about her. She is made-over to be what they need her to be. She has no control over her image or what the result. Her only choice was accepting the assignment. This seems to work against the post-feminist adulation of choice. That Grace is in some way forced or coerced into this position complicates things. Her duty forces her, her desire to be a good agent, to catch the bad guy. But again, it is also the place from which the humor arises.

In a cycle she identifies as "The Crime-Fighting Chick Flick," Gates argues that this sort of makeover highlights the constructedness of feminine identity. That is, that femininity is not innate, but a performance. *Miss Congeniality* sets up a kind of equivalent between the hard work of investigation and the hard work of *being a woman*, granted a woman at the highest peak of femininity, the pageant contestant.

In *Miss Congeniality*, even as she is explicitly made into a proper female, there is never an accompanying sexual threat to her (or by her) or to any of the other women in the film. It is as if *appropriate* femininity is not only non-sexual, not sexually dangerous, but actually removes the threat of sexual violence. Her childish taunting of Bratt's character ("You think I'm preeeeety, you

want to huuuuug me...”) removes any real tension between them. In addition when her roommate reveals that she was meeting a man, it is met with gasps and giggles, as if men are foreign creatures across the gym at an eighth grade dance. Pizza is their gateway drug; from reaching out to share a small pizza, they end up still in their workout clothes) at a club, covered in paint. Even when the women of the pageant go out to a bar and do shots, there are no threats or even interest from men, as if all the work they put into being proper ladies renders them immune from sex. When Gracie and Cheryl (Miss Rhode Island a potential suspect) start having girl talk and Gracie asks if Cheryl has ever committed a crime, she tells her about stealing a pair of underwear from a Department store (“My mother said they were Satan’s Panties!”). When Gracie pushes her, she outlines getting assaulted by her lit professor. As if *that* were a crime. Gracie gets a break in the case in the bathroom of the club where she is taking care of the passed out Cheryl. All the girls are in there gossiping.

It turns out they catch The Citizen without her, but the pageant is still under threat; the person who sent the letter was a copycat. So there is still a threat, but no one believes her. We however, know Gracie is right, because we see glimpses of the bomber practicing on (not unironically) manikins. She is undecidable because she loses the feeling that she *is* an agent. She loses that part of her identity as she becomes more and more contestant. She is the job. The transitive slippage defines her. While Yael D Sherman proposes that the irresolvable terms of the films is sisterhood and neoliberal femininity, I would argue that there is a different contradiction at stake.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Yael D. Sherman, “Neoliberal Femininity in *Miss Congeniality*,” in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, eds. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2011), 90.



She does not set herself apart from the other contestants but finds solidarity with them. It's liberating because these are amazing girls. And they are SMART! Really! – Never mind that the whole thing is designed to paper over their intelligence. The fact that it's a surprise is exactly the problem. It really *is* a scholarship program. The tension between the sexual display of the pageant and the explicit and repeated (and ironic) naming of contest as a scholarship program mirrors the tensions of the film. The winner of the pageant is clearly coded as not-too-smart, as when she answers, "April 24<sup>th</sup>" to the question, "What is your ideal date." The contestants discuss amongst themselves the way that the pageant can draw attention to their personal causes, and yet we see them all mindless repeating "World Peace" over and over in response to the question, "What is the one thing our society needs?"

Gracie literally gets applauded for performing conventional femininity, both in the swimsuit competition and after we hear crickets chirp after she offers "harsher punishment for parole violators" as the most important thing or society needs, only to with "and world peace." She questions why anyone would voluntarily enter a pageant. Mathews offers, "Scholarship money. A chance to see the world." She says, "Join the Marines. It's like feminism never even happened, you know. I think any woman who does is catering to some misogynistic Neanderthal mentality." We know that by making such a lucid and cogent feminist comment that she will have to be transformed. Hollywood has very little place for the explicitly feminist. Because we are post feminist. All that stuff is so passé.<sup>30</sup> The explicitly regressive move here illustrates her divided

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<sup>30</sup> "With discourses of ideal femininity clearly tilting away from the professional path, retreatism has become a recognizable narrative trope. Accordingly, both film and television have incorporated fantasies of hometown return in which a heroine gives up her life in the city to take up again the role of daughter, sister, wife or sweetheart in a hometown setting. This is the premise of films including *Practical Magic* [1998], *Hope Floats* [1998], *One True*

nature. She transforms from Agent to Miss New Jersey.

In *Miss Congeniality* the move is not necessarily toward romance, but towards a weird sort of self-actualization, a becoming woman, even a becoming human. When she fails to acknowledge her femininity, she is a bad person. None of the men in the film, certainly not the wonderfully groomed and attractive Benjamin Bratt, or the fastidious Michael Caine, or Shatner's character who has made a career on his looks as much as any woman, behave the way she does early in the film. She does not just behave in a masculine manner, but with bad manners. And yet the ways those manifest are as masculine. So there is an attempt to associate positive social quality with the feminine side of the equation.

Unlike most movie makeovers, Gracie does not seem to take any pleasure in the process. There is no moment where she luxuriates in excess consumerism, as has been the pattern since *Pretty Woman*. The process is instead shown to be heavily industrialized, requiring an airplane hanger and a battalion of assistances to move her through the explicitly painful, boring and

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*Thing* [1998], and *Sweet Home Alabama* [2002] as well as television series such as "Providence," "Maggie Winters" and "Judging Amy." Such retreatism must be contextualized within a culture that has visibly heightened its efforts to idealize mothering over the last decade while registering concerns about the compatibility of the "female personality" and the corporate workplace. These concerns have taken their most extreme form in the emergence of executive coaching firms which train women to play down assertiveness to avoid alienating their colleagues in the business world (for an account of one such firm see Banarjee). A corresponding development in romance films has been an emphasis on schooling women in the need to scale back their professionalism lest they lose their femininity (*One Fine Day* [1996], *The Wedding Planner* [2001], *Someone Like You* [2001], *Miss Congeniality* [2000], *Six Days and Seven Nights* [1998], *Bed of Roses* [1996])." Diane Negra, "Quality Postfeminism: Sex and the Single Girl of HBO." *Genders* issue 39, 2004 [http://www.genders.org/g39/g39\\_negra.html](http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html). The linking of these films is interesting to me. It hardly seems to matter what the profession is, just that there is one.

uncomfortable process of transformation. A running joke through the film is her constant thwarted desire to eat. She is constantly having snacks snatched out of her hands and she is always complaining about being hungry. As if being a proper woman meant always being hungry. We are not asked to think too much about the fact that one cannot transform ones *bodyweight* overnight, and whatever she had been consuming heretofore (and we've seen her eat a lot, what is the obsession with eating?) created the body she is currently inhabiting. And that is one of the inherent challenges of the whole makeover genre that *Miss Congeniality* both highlights and elides, it makes a woman's body a foreign country that must be conquered. It is something other and unruly.

While there are certainly moments when Gracie is pleased with the results of her makeover, she does not seem overly invested in them. When the case is over, she goes back to her pantsuits and ponytails. Her appearance and demeanor has changed a bit, but she has not. She *is* the job. Although this too gives her existential trouble. "I'm totally screwing up in there! I don't even feel like a real agent anymore." "I don't care anymore. I am the job. I am the job.... All I want to do is do my job and for the last three days I feel like I'm completely lost." The question that has brought on this moment of crises is about relationships. So relationships are what make us female, what make us human. "I've been waiting 5 years to run my own op. Do you think I'd blow it on the wrong girl?" She responds by saying that she is the only one who looks "half decent in a bikini and isn't on maternity leave." Now it doesn't hurt anything that when they are having this conversation he is wet and in the pool in only his trunks displaying his masculinity for our delectation and she is in a pink evening gown. He goes on to tell her that he chose her because she was "smart, you don't take any crap from people, you're easy to talk to (when you're not armed)."

Like many of our detectives, she investigates women, and it is her status as woman that gives her access. It is simply an accident that she is the only female field agent under 35 who isn't

pregnant. This is both similar and different from the women that are used as bait by agents in films throughout the 40s and 50s, those G-man movies who sets someone up as a singer in a nightclub to catch the eye of the underworld kingpin. What is intriguing about *Miss Congeniality* is that she is *not* using this feminine transformation to catch a man, at least not to seduce a criminal and exact a confession. Instead she is doing it to fit in with the locals. By becoming a contestant, she becomes invisible. Or that is the hope. The humor of the film depends on her inability to become invisible. Or the persistence of the inappropriate.

*Miss Congeniality* depends on Sandra Bullock's star persona and is certainly conceived of as a vehicle for her. In *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens, & TV Heroines: Contemporary Screen Image of Women*, Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer devote an entire chapter to Bullock.<sup>31</sup> They see her as the most versatile of blockbuster Hollywood heroines, not confined to the romantic comedy, and notes that her "professional persona takes precedence over getting her hitched," and that her success professionally is "counterbalanced by personal failures."<sup>32</sup> While they certainly make a compelling argument in light of Bullock's filmography, I think we could make a larger claim that this persona is uniquely in line with the figure of the female detective.

Our pleasure as spectators, is watching the "real" Sandra Bullock being revealed from under the frumpy make-under of the character of Gracie Hart. We want everyone to recognize her qualities, the qualities that Agent Roberts enumerated, which are hidden beneath her physical

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<sup>31</sup> The other stars getting this treatment are Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, and Renee Zellweger. Their choices were based on actors popular with blockbusters in the 1990s and early 2000s.

<sup>32</sup> Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer, *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens, and TV Heroines, Contemporary Screen Images of Women*, (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 37.

unruliness. Because Bullock's appeal is as something of an every-woman/girl-next-door type, her glamour is always forgiven. It is not too sexy or threatening. The Comedic mode cannot be too sexy. Sexiness is too definitive. We think we understand a woman when her sexuality is apparent.

Throughout her career, she appears in films as an investigator with various box office success: *The Net* (Irwin Winkler, 1995), *A Time to Kill* (Joel Schumacher, 1996), *Murder By Numbers* (Barbet Schroeder, 2002) and *Premonition* (Mennan Yapo, 2007) and of course, *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* (John Pasquin, 2005). Even though these films can be considered wildly different in genre (and indeed mode), the way in which she is figured is remarkably consistent. There is a strong alignment between her star persona and the way the female investigator is figured. But *Miss Congeniality* can certainly be considered the most commercially successful of all these films and is situated squarely in the middle of Bullock's career. However, even while Bullock works in different genres, her easy, friendly, girl-next-door charm is remarkably stable, unlike the way that Goldberg was in 1987. This film instead speaks more directly to the generic instability that is linked with her persona and deeply tied to films in this mode.<sup>33</sup>

Even after the successful conclusion of the case, her boss never acknowledges her success or correctness. Instead she is rewarded with a kiss and a sash. The sash is awarded by the other women of the pageant, giving her the title of Miss Congeniality. But who wants their investigator

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<sup>33</sup> This is not Bullock's first makeover film. *Love Potion #9* (Dale Launer, 1992) was released a decade earlier, and before she became a star. But that makeover was magic, not the result of impossibly hard work. Or rather, the hard work was separate from the transformation. The hard work came in the scientific work of crafting the elixir, not in crafting a persona, which had to do with how other people perceived her and that initial change of perception led to the change in her appearance. You can't wear a lab coat to a ball.

to be *nice*? Who wants their protagonist to be *nice*? Who even wants their Miss America to be *nice*? Nice is not a particularly valued commodity. In its own defense, the film does spend some time looking at what nice looks like. Is tough love *nice*? Is tempting women whose futures depend on their appearance with pizza, nice? Nice is certainly not a quality valued in a detective. But it is only when she makes the empathetic leap, when she becomes nice, that insight that will help her successfully finish the case becomes available to her. She needs to learn cooperation, that is, to be nice. To be nice is to be feminine—nice manners (no picking of the ears or nose in public), nice looking (to be hot).

In a far more typical fashion than *There's Always a Woman*, the success of the case is mirrored by the success of heterosexual romance, here made possible by Gracie's transformation. While this might seem like a failure on the part of Benjamin Bratt (to recognize her possibility *before* the make-over as Richard Gere does in *Pretty Woman*) it is a sign of the structural generic differences of the two films. But the makeover is not about pleasing him. That is simply a happy auxiliary outcome. While the success of the detective plot makes the romance possible, the same is not true of the romance. The success of the romance is not as clearly linked to the success of the case. This highlights the fact that the weight of the film does not rest in romance (this is reinforced even further in *Miss Congeniality 2*, which begins with the failure of heterosexual romance and is replaced with female friendship).

## 4.6 CONCLUSION

The crime-solving woman in this mode is split on the level of character and star persona, is split

on the level of genre, and split on the level of gender. She does not perform gender in an expected fashion. While *There's Always a Woman* handles these issues more easily, perhaps because she is safely married, the other iterations really struggle with it. And the struggle emerges of the level of genre. Thus Gracie Hart gets an industrial-strength makeover and Rizzoli gets a maternal melodrama backstory. The more conflicted they are, the less they take on in the investigation, as if the investigation was a means of interrogating their own divided selves.

## 5.0 THE AFFECTIVE—*I KNOW BECAUSE I LOVE*

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Currently understood as a clever exploration of film effects and self-reflexivity, Buster Keaton's 1924 film, *Sherlock Jr.*, is also a detective story. While for the most part, I haven't discussed silent films in the body of this study, I wish here to begin with a film that is both silent, and one that doesn't actually feature a female protagonist. However, its use of humor, parody, and self-reflexivity point to certain qualities that are crucial to our understanding of female investigators in the Affective mode.

The film is divided into two worlds, the "real" world and an imagined film world. In the first, more mundane world, a projectionist (Buster Keaton) is courting a girl and has a rival for her affections, the local sheik. The rival has stolen her father's watch and pawned it in order to afford to buy the girl a gift. We are shown this. It is no mystery. When the father realizes the watch is missing, the sheik frames the projectionist for the crime by using the techniques of the projectionist's own book, "How to Be a Detective." The poor projectionist is found with the pawn ticket in his pocket. He vows to clear his name, but doesn't get very far with it. At work at the movie house, he falls asleep and dreams himself into a detective film. In it, *he* plays the famous detective, solves the mystery, and saves the girl. The diegetic mystery, on the other hand, is solved



with remarkable efficiency and lack of fuss by The Girl, taking the logical step of going to the pawn broker and asking who brought in the missing watch. Why this expediency never occurred to anyone else, not the villain, the father nor the accused/detective, is unclear. We watch her entering the store, talking to the owner and getting the answer, but that is the extent of what we see her investigate. She does it because she loves the lowly projectionist and refuses to believe that he would be guilty of such a thing. She *knows* he couldn't do it, so she *proves* he didn't do it.

She is a joke, of course, but she is a joke on Sherlock, Jr., on Keaton, on movie detectives, on men in general. Her abilities are not in question, mostly because it doesn't occur to anyone that she has any. Her double in the film is not able to do such things; she is rescued by the great detective, who also solves the crime and catches the bad guy. The Girl is able to solve the problem with cool efficiency; she does it without sacrificing any femininity. The joke is that solving crimes really isn't that hard, for all the fuss the fellas make over it. Here, clearly, the resolution of the case is linked with the success of the romance, as Keaton studies the film showing for hints on how to make his move.

This chapter explores the investigating women that are least likely to be considered detectives in any conventional sense. In the Affective mode, the woman becomes a detective almost by default. The official channels of justice have failed and she is motivated to solve the crime by a deep-seated intuition about the guilt or innocence of the main suspect. It is from this intuition, this affective knowledge, that the solution to the crime unfolds. In the films I will be examining in this chapter, the link between the investigation and the romance are linked, but negatively. Love is the motivation and the lack of love leads to the solution. Without the affective, emotional connection there would be no investigation; the crime would remain unsolved. But this love is not romantic. The solution to the crime does not resolve the romance.

She knows because she *doesn't* love. That is, when a woman's love for her husband begins to falter, it is because he is a criminal of one sort or another. While in Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941) and *Rebecca* (1940), the woman's suspicion turns out to be paranoid, in *Gaslight* (Cukor, 1944), *Stage Fright* (Hitchcock, 1950), *Sudden Fear* (Miller, 1952), *Undercurrent* (Minnelli, 1946), *Christmas Holiday* (Siodmak, 1944) and several others from that moment reveal that the lack of love and paranoia are linked. By 2000, this thread can be traced in Sam Raimi's *The Gift*. It is the protagonist's loving nature *in general* that makes her so good at what she does, but it is her uneasiness with her burgeoning love affair that leads her to the killer. In this, we are clearly linked up to the Avenger, but as we will see the valence is quite different, the persona and techniques and the *feel* of these films is different, the amount of time spent on the relationships is different.

The women in this mode are the least likely to ruffle ideological feathers. They tend to be firmly situated within patriarchal structures: they are wives, mothers, girlfriends and secretaries first. She is frequently intimately linked with the crime. The investigations in this mode often take place within a domestic sphere. They are clearly defined by these feminine positions. While resourceful, the detectives in this mode do not tend to be ambitious, as such. The narrative actively resists any intimation that she will continue to act as a detective once this particular crime is solved. The investigation emerges out of necessity; once the emergency is past, so too is the motivation to investigate. The affective mode, more than any other, values and highlights particularly feminine kinds of knowledges. Because the women investigators tend not to fall within the traditional purview of the detective, the films in this mode show the greatest generic variety: we see it operate in *noirs*, gothic melodramas, tense thrillers, horror, and even as with *Sherlock, Jr.*, comedies.

The need and desire to control to contain the possibilities of meanings with a figure that is ideologically disruptive then causes the film to attempt to contain her through over-determination.

Steve Neale offers this insight into the ways genres work: “Genres also provide a means of regulating memory and expectation, a means of containing the possibilities of meaning.”<sup>1</sup> If she slips through the detective tropes, she is caught in the melodramatic. The gaps between the workings of the genres (sometimes more than two) is the space where her meaning is clearest. That is, the parts that genre *cannot* account for are the most interesting. But it is only through understanding where the gaps are that we can see the overflow.

Generically, the Affective investigators are closest to the women-in-danger films. By this term, I mean where the entire force of the narrative directed towards a woman’s rescue from some catastrophe, natural or human. There are many films we could name women-in-danger films, from *Die Hard* to *North by Northwest*. It’s a fundamental melodramatic trope. In the films I read, however, the female protagonists are not the focal point of the danger. This dramatically changes the orientation of the film. This is not to say that there isn’t a woman in danger, nor is it to say that there aren’t moments when the investigating woman, herself is in danger and indeed, in need of rescue. But rather, that trope does not form the structural (syntactical) organization of the film. Syntactic structures are vital to understanding genre. The affective mode is structured like a conventional detective story, but *feel* like a woman in danger story. The investigators are women we are very used to seeing in danger—virtuous, obedient, loyal, conventional.

The loyalty and bravery of the Affective investigator is frequently commented on within the diegesis. These are qualities not normally associated with the housewife. However, because it is a feminine woman who embodies them, they are easily recuperated as versions of fidelity and a

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1980), 54. As quoted by Janet Thumim, *Celluloid Sisters: Women and Popular Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 45.

stolid kind of sticking around. However, this recuperation is tangled. The Affective investigator is so loyal that she is willing to sleep with someone else to support her lover, at emotional and physical risk to herself. The affective investigators are brave in ways that are marked different from the way investigating men are brave. It is not so much putting themselves in physical danger, although they sometimes do, but rather putting themselves in emotional danger. Emotional danger is not simply making themselves emotionally vulnerable, although they do; it is putting themselves at risk, psychologically, affectively. They are willing to unearth psychic scars, to dwell in affective miasmas, *in order to solve the crime*. The goal-oriented nature of the narrative sets the films in this mode apart from the way melodramas and women's films figure women. This is precisely the place of generic disjunction.

Affective Investigators are not glamorous. They are not sexually dangerous, unless the investigation demands it. Sexuality is safely cordoned off from their nature and punishment is swift if they color outside of the lines. They carry this knowledge with them. As a result, they do not seem to take any pleasure in their sexuality. It is wielded as a weapon, in service to the specific exigencies of the case. Even their appearance mirrors this. In their ordinary life (before—and it is clear—after the case is concluded), they favor the ill-fitting and the practical. She wears housedresses not pantsuits. That is, the affective investigator is not in disguise. Her femininity is *not* a masquerade, is not separate within the film. Her association with love allows her a more uncomplicated version of femininity than any of the other modalities.

These investigators are furthest from what we conventionally think of as detectives, but the plot circles around their investigations of a crime. This plot structure remains the defining characteristic of the figure from top to bottom. But in the affective mode, an equally heavy focus is placed upon the investigators' relationships and it is from the personal, from the space of the

relationship, that both the motive and the means of investigation emerge. If we see courtship in these films, we know it will turn out badly (the relationship at any rate. Thus the joke of *Sherlock, Jr.*). If the film picks up in mid-relationship (whatever that might look like—from an apparently unrequited love for one’s boss, to a commitment to a dead man, to an absolute faith in a cheating husband) we can be assured of the crime will be solved and the relationship affirmed. Her love will not be in vain.

The ordinariness, acceptability, and uncomplicated femininity are what is most notable about the Affective investigator, especially in this study’s crowd of misfits, women difficult to frame and contain. But her ordinariness, her practicality, her recognizability is her most dangerous quality. Because she is ordinary, not unlike a “regular” woman, she reacts in conventional ways. She doesn’t *enjoy* the danger. That is to say, the investigators in other modes choose danger, choose to investigate. The Affective investigators are chosen by circumstances. They will see it through, but not for desire or pleasure or personal satisfaction, but for the one that is loved. It is an act of self-abnegation even as they are at their strongest. Think, for example, of Mildred Pierce. It is when she is at the height of her personal power that she turns herself in for the murder her daughter committed. Or even Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* (Hitchcock, 1943), who must sacrifice her girlish illusions and her love for her uncle to solve the crime. And as we will see, Cathy sacrifices the possibility of new love in order to save her cheating husband. And it is through the sacrifice *itself* that the solution is reached. This mode was especially popular during the period of *film noir*. *The Stranger on the Third Floor* (Ingster, 1940), considered the first *noir*, fits within this modality.

*Dark Corner* (Hathaway, 1946) and *Phantom Lady* (Siodmak, 1944)<sup>2</sup> both function largely through this structure.<sup>3</sup>

The mise-en-scene of the films in which the Affective investigator figures is perhaps the most important of all the modes. This is one way in which it links most explicitly with the woman's picture. The mise-en-scene has much to tell us. In *Sherlock Jr.* for instance, The Girl resides in a pleasant, but average middle class home, two-story clapboard. She is also so much more resourceful and active than the version of her in the film within the film. In Sherlock's fantasy, in the upper class milieu of the melodrama, she embodies the traditional roles available for the female, in need of rescue and the prize to be won, the Pearl of Great Price, if you will. The mise-en-scene prescribes the way in which she behaves.

Class occupies this place of the unspoken middle term. Class is deeply imbricated in issues of the performativity of femininity, with ideas of freedom and working, access and mobility, issues that are precisely at stake for the figure of the investigating woman. The difference between an amateur and a professional is if you get paid for it. And a woman getting paid for it always brings up issues of prostitution. It is only in this modality that the women are never professionals. And their amateur status is highlighted and protected by the narrative. It lets them be ladylike.

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<sup>2</sup> Although *Phantom Lady* is more complex. It cycles through all of the modes.

<sup>3</sup> *The Penalty* (Wallace Worsely, 1920), *Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924), *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940), *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *I Wake Up Screaming* (Bruce Humberstone, 1941), *This Gun For Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942) *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943), *Christmas Holiday* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), *Gaslight* (Cukor, 1944), *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), *Fallen Angel* (Otto Preminger, 1946), *Black Angel* (Roy William Neill, 1946), *Sudden Fear* (David Miller, 1952), *Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irvin Kershner, 1978), *Stranger Among Us* (Stanley Lumet, 1992).

## 5.2 *BLACK ANGEL*

*Black Angel* (Roy William Neill, 1946) provides a crystalline example of the ways in which the crime-solving woman in the Affective mode functions. I debated whether to include this one or not because the female investigator in this film is not a *good* investigator. In fact, she is terrible at it. Her instincts are wrong, and her risks are for nothing. But that doesn't mean she doesn't do the work. And the why and wherefores are fascinating.

*Black Angel* is the story of a woman, Cathy Bennett (June Vincent) trying to prove her husband innocent of murder. She is not trying to *solve* the crime, and she has no particular interest in justice. The film is structured somewhere between a detective story and a woman's film as articulated by Mary Ann Doane in *The Desire to Desire*. The woman's picture and the detective film are designed to have two different audiences and two different sets of problems. The particular way in which they conflict here is unique to the Affective investigator. In the affective mode, the woman's story and point of view is emphasized, even while the structure functions clearly as a detective story. And like women's films, *Black Angel* is rife with instabilities. Produced squarely in the period that she discusses (the 1940s) Cathy is in many ways the perfect embodiment of the women's picture protagonist; she is conventionally marked by "a deviation from some norm of mental stability or health, resulting in the recurrent investigation of psychical mechanisms frequently linked with the 'feminine condition'—masochism, hysteria, neurosis, paranoia."<sup>4</sup> We will see that some of the qualities Doane mentions, masochism and paranoia, are displaced onto Marty Blair as a way of offering Cathy more investigative mastery, but the move is never complete.

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<sup>4</sup> Doane, *Desire to Desire*, 36.

As in the classical detective story,<sup>5</sup> we begin with the crime and then the story consists of the investigator attempting to reconstruct it. Unlike the classical example, here the emotional pull of the crime is split. The actual crime, the murder of Mavis Marlowe, has very little affective weight. She is portrayed as thoroughly bad and beautiful: vain, narcissistic, cruel to her servants and sexually dangerous, a classic femme fatale. Because she was asking for it, through her beauty, her meanness and her blackmailing, her murder is portrayed as no real crime. The crime that our detective Cathy is investigating is the false imprisonment of her husband. While without any explicit critique of the structures that jailed him, the entire film questions their effectiveness, if not their intentions.

Kirk Bennett (John Phillips) was visiting Mavis because she was blackmailing him, threatening to tell his wife, Cathy, about their affair. As in many of the films in this study, we are not particularly seeking justice for the victim of the crime, who, if a terrible person, *was* murdered. No one in the film has any sympathy for her. Even her ex-husband, who goes on a huge bender after her death, doesn't exactly seem to be mourning her, so much as feeling sorry for himself. This mirrors fairly precisely the way the victim was portrayed in *Phantom Lady*. But where Kansas was pretty good at solving the crime, of actually accomplishing the investigation, Cathy is terrible. The only thing she is good at is inspiring a man to be a better person, which in real life might be something of an accomplishment, in the context of detective thriller is pretty soupy.

The central object of investigation is getting Kirk off the murder charges. We know Kirk didn't do it; we see him discovering the body of Mavis Marlowe (Constance Dowling). We are not required to have faith in him. But we don't know who *did* kill her. We are in the exact same

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<sup>5</sup> See Todorov's "The Typology of Detective Fiction."



position as Cathy. We are aligned with her (whose name evokes a Jane Austen character) in believing in the innocence of her husband Kirk, if not in caring quite so much. When the cops arrive to looking for Kirk, they tell her about his affair and the murder. Her first words are, “He didn’t do it.” The murder at least. He is arrested and stands trial. She wishes she could do more. He assures that she has been wonderful, “especially after...” “Please, Kirk.” She interrupts him, “You’re my husband. I’ll always stand by you.” Even when he is accused of killing his lover. That is loyalty. The vision of her at this moment emphasizes her angelic quality. She is wearing a wide brimmed hat, very light colored with dark trim. This creates an effect that is both child-like and reminiscent of a halo framing her face. Curiously, Cathy never doubts that he slept with Mavis. It just doesn’t seem to matter. In fact, it illustrates her angelic purity. (And perhaps “explains” why he cheated on her, she has the sex appeal of a maiden aunt. And Mavis for all that she is deeply unpleasant is at least alive...until she’s not, of course). Cathy is not a figure of desire here. It seems incongruous that she is Black Angel of the title.<sup>6</sup>

As in the other modes, it is the failure of men that leaves a gap for the investigating woman. The cops have given up. They have a killer behind bars. Her husband has given up, wallowing in his guilt over the affair. But here the complex series of things she does not know, that is, her own failures of knowledge and intuition, organize the action. Determined to find some new evidence after Kirk’s conviction, Cathy is in a phone booth presumably trying to get some information on Mavis who may have worked as an extra. She overhears some extras discussing the murder at the studio drugstore. The drugstore itself is a marvel, one of those magical moments of self-reflexivity

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<sup>6</sup> In the novel, Kirk frequently refers to her as “Angelface,” and when he stops, this is the first sign that he is having an affair.

purely for the spectacle of the thing, with everyone in costume. The scene opens with a deep focus shot that gives us the sign of the location. In the foreground, a Cossack and a patriotically-costumed chorus girl eat sandwiches. There are cowgirls, sheiks and gypsies milling through the chaotic frame. In the back, we see Cathy in her boater on the phone. In a sharp edit, we move in to her with her back to us in medium shot speaking into the phone asking about Mavis. An off-screen voice says, "That Mavis Marlowe was plain poison." Cathy puts her head up and leans over to listen more. "She did that poor Marty Blair like dirt...Know what I said to myself when I heard she got cooled off? Marty Blair finally caught up with her. And wrung her neck." The moment is a marvelous one. As they continue to gossip Cathy hangs up the phone and drifts over. There are three people in the booth: two women (of a certain age) befeathered in Victorian finery and a very tidy dandy of a gentleman. When Cathy confronts them, the two women abruptly leave but the man offers her a bit of information on how to find Marty Blair (Dan Duryea). Overhearing a cheap bit of gossip sets her on her way. And ironically, the mean-spirited speculation is exactly what happened. But we need another hour to achieve the same knowledge.

This sends her in search of Marty, Mavis's estranged husband. She tracks him down to his seedy bedsit. Cathy comes to him in his bedroom, a place that *he is locked into*. It's dangerous. It's bearding the lion in its den and it's the only time in the whole picture where June Vincent as Cathy comes alive. Her anger and rage and desperation all leak out in this scene. She stands over him as he emerges from a drunken sleep, sprawled over his bed, still in the clothes from the night before. She sits next to him and shakes him awake, but she keeps her hand on his back. It's an intimate and sensual moment that two people who aren't lovers don't usually share. The moment is broken with, "I'm Mrs. Kirk Bennett," as she stands up to loom over him like an avenging angel, still in her little straw boater.

The dialogue between the two continues the dangerous rapport. “She didn’t give you a very fair deal, did she?” “You weren’t exactly dealt a handful of aces,” he replies, thus establishing their rapport. She is weirdly powerful, dynamic and in control of this scene, by turns wheedling and antagonizing. When he tells her “And don’t feel sorry for me. I don’t go for that.” She responds, “Feeling pretty sorry for yourself, aren’t you.” In a different film, a *Howards Hawks* movie, maybe, this kind of connection demonstrated by the rapid fire exchanges in a sexually charged location would mean something, would be a sign of their affinity, of the inevitability of their romance. But in a woman’s film it is the sign of danger, it is the thing to be warded against.

But she convinces Marty to help her find out who really killed Mavis. So the drunken souse of a jilted husband and the pure long-suffering and loyal wife team up to solve a murder. They do so recreating Marty’s ordinary romance with Mavis. They put together a nightclub act: Carver and Martin. He teaches Cathy how to act, how to dress, how to sing, just as he taught Mavis. And they go undercover to the club that another suspect, Marco (Peter Lorre), owns, hoping to get crucial evidence of his involvement in Mavis’s murder. Clearly, the priorities of the two are not quite in alignment: the melodrama and the detective story are creating competing sets of narrative expectations.

Cathy plants a story in the gossip column intimating that she and Marco are an item. She wants to get up into Marco’s safe where he might have some incriminating papers. Implying an affair, and perhaps even allowing Marco to seduce her, is the way in. “That’s the hard way, isn’t it?” Marty asks her. “I have to get into it, Marty. No matter how.” She wants to save her husband so badly that she is willing to do anything (*anything!*) to get some new evidence. Pretend a romance with Marty so he will continue to help her, seduce Peter Lorre to get access to what he keeps

hidden, anything. But there is never a breath of intimation that she is doing any of this to get a bit of her own back after her husband cheated on her, or, god forbid, for pleasure. Instead it is *for* her husband, despite the obvious chemistry she has with Marty.

When she finally gets the opportunity to search Marko's safe, not only is she caught, but she was caught in a trip deliberately set by Marko for her, and she learns that everything she had done, the undercover work, the singing career, the seduction of Marco, was "for nothing." The official investigator, Detective Flood, was not only was aware of Marko's connection with Marlowe but physically had him in custody when the murder was being committed. That seems like a piece of information that would have been useful beforehand. Not only that, but Marko knows who she is the entire time and seems to enjoy her humiliation. He deliberately sets her up.

Finally, it is Marty who "solves" the case. After Cathy definitively rejects him, he goes out on a bender wandering from bar to bar. Almost blind drunk, he finds a mysterious brooch that went missing in the original murder scene. The blond who is wearing it claims that Marty himself gave it to her. He tries to grab it back which results in a lovely raucous bar fight and with Marty being carted off to the county hospital in a straightjacket. He wakes up from his epic bender and suddenly remembers that *he* had committed the murder and the whole thing is reenacted before our eyes. He finagles his way out of the restraints and out of the hospital back to Cathy's house where, before getting drunk all over again and smashing up the place, he places a call for Flood to come there. Cathy returns from her last visit to her husband who is scheduled to the gas chamber that very morning. She sees the brooch in Marty's hand as Flood comes in and makes an urgent last minute call to the governor. And so it ends.

### 5.2.1 On the Importance of Mise-En-Scene

Mise-en-scene is of particular importance in this modality. This is both a sign and an indicator of its connection to the woman's picture. The woman's picture is deeply concerned with women's stories and overflows with meaning into its mise-en-scene. Perhaps, this is because in Classical Hollywood cinema, and indeed patriarchal culture more generally, a woman is fundamentally defined by her surroundings, as opposed to a man who is master of them. The mise-en-scene, thus, carries a great deal of meaning. It is meant to be read, not as clues to the crime, but as clues to the character. The importance that women's pictures give to the mise-en-scene, the way in which it conveys so much meaning, excess of meaning, is *because* of the challenges that a female protagonist represents. They are an extension of the woman. In *Black Angel*, the mise-en-scene does a lot of work.

There are several important settings in *Black Angel*: Cathy's house, Marty's seedy residence hotel with the lock on the outside of the door, Mavis's apartment (and the scene of the crime), and the club where Cathy is try to entrap Marco. The significant developments between Cathy and Marty occur in their respective domestic spaces and the plot development at the clubs and bars and of course the county hospital where Marty is locked up to sleep off his drunk. In this case (and perhaps tellingly) Mavis's apartment is treated as public space. There is a clear separation between the two realms. It is not clear who was more adept at the public spaces, and that is exactly what is at stake in this particular generic combination. Usually men are masters of public spaces. Marty, however, is NOT good at them. In fact he is constantly disrupting them and getting kicked out of them and annoying the other patrons of them. It is only under Cathy's restraining influence (they drink sodas instead of scotches) that he regains any ability. He makes sure she looks right

and she makes sure he acts right. However, her domestic space, the place where women are supposed to have some control, is consistently being invaded: by cops, by the affair, by Marty himself.

We are informed of the setting by the side of a bus: The City of Los Angeles, which passes through the foreground and exits the frame to reveal a man, tall lanky leaning on a storefront window. The camera zooms in on his face as he looks is looking up and across the street. The camera angle shifts to ostensibly his point of view and at the apartment high rise across the street. The camera repeats its zooming move this time zeroing on a venetian blind covered window towards the top of the building. The camera peers right through the blinds until it cuts in to the interior focusing on an elaborate crystal chandelier and then zooming back out to an equally elaborate even excessive apartment that articulates an almost Sirkian Melodramatic mise-en-scene, overflowing with mirrors and huge flower arrangements and silks and crystal and gilt, fur and marble. We see a plain woman putting on her hat and hear a voice calling from the next room, “Flo.” And we follow the plain woman through the living room into the bedroom where see a beautiful woman brushing her hair gorgeous framed by flowing curtains. It is reminiscent of Gilda’s dramatic introduction. But it is the woman’s voice, and the first words we hear and she literally sets the plot in motion.

In comparison, we meet Cathy as she opens the door to her suburban bungalow. Two cops have knocked and push their way past her. As opposed to Mavis’s elegant gown, sheer where it isn’t glittering, Cathy is in a rather too-big polka-dot dress, with puffed sleeves and high neckline. The mise-en-scene offers a similar contrast. The interior of the house is homey, full of flowered chintz; it is fully domestic and domesticating. Even Marty is tamed in its presence. Later in the investigation, Cathy comes home from shopping, an arm full of parcels and Marty is unexpectedly

in her kitchen. He's handling a bottle of scotch, but has not opened it. He has brought her flowers. It is a strange false domesticity. Their relationship has to this point not invaded her private space, her home with her husband.

Cathy's look of severe discomfort after he leaves the kitchen and begins playing the piano in the next room is deeply ambivalent. Which part (or all) is she uncomfortable with? His invasion, his affection, his proximity to the whiskey? But as she enters the room and sees him at the piano, she smiles. She comes behind him, putting her hands on his shoulders. He's playing a new song and asks her to read the words, which are very romantic. "I wrote it for you... 'Here's my heart to keep.'" She is again uncomfortable and sits down to talk to him. And in an echo of their first conversation, she says, "Thank you for everything you've done for me." "Well you haven't exactly kicked me in the face," he responds. But he keeps pushing even as she is clearly uncomfortable. He assumes that their investigation, their partnership will lead to a relationship, forgetting that she is investigating to free her husband. "You stuck by him. You won't owe him a thing." Cathy does not take the opportunity to clarify the issue. She needs Marty, and there is certainly chemistry between the two. But she resists. Her resistance is her skill, is the core of her investigation. She just changes the subject and lets him go on thinking it. She does not trouble the domestic space. She begins to sing and there is a match on the song as we cut to the nightclub.

The nightclub Rio represents an in-between space between the public and the private.<sup>7</sup> Rio occupies, what Vivian Sobchack calls "Lounge-time," the particular chronotope of the *noir*. Rather than larger and vaguer formulations of "the city" common to *noir* criticism, she seeks to out more

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<sup>7</sup> Vivian Sobchack, "Lounge-time: The Post-War Crisis and the Chronotope of Film Noir," in *Re-Figuring American Film Genres*. Ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 129-170.

specific locations that run through *noir*: the motel room, the diner, the cocktail lounge, cafes, hotel rooms, pool halls, hospital rooms and office space, boarding houses. And these spaces are contradictions to the “irrevocable loss of the home” (144). They are anonymous inhospitable places to drift in and out of. These semantic elements in *noir* are revelatory of the historical moment; they are the “spaces of social dislocation, isolation and existential alienation” (155.) Marty and Cathy are fully immersed in this in-between space. They are never merely customers, they are on the inside, their relation with the place is intimate. However, it is not their place either making it doubly in-between for them. They are interlopers, there under false pretenses.

### **5.2.2 The Lack of Mastery**

Throughout the film, Cathy is always a step behind. After the murder, the cops take control. They invade her nice middle class home before she knows anything is amiss. They take Kirk away and interrogate him before she has a chance to speak to him. Cathy is not witness to the investigation or the interrogation, even while these scenes are shown to the audience. This is just the beginning of things that we know and she does not. She does not control the point of view of the film, she does not set the plot in motion. However, it *is* her drive that seeks to untangle the events. From the beginning there are crucial things other people in the story know that she does not; she never quite catches up.

She is the worst seductress. When Marco first invites her up to his office (an invitation that was not unexpected in any way, indeed was engineered by Cathy), she nervously twiddles her rings and the fringe of her wrap. When as a sign of his affection for her, Marco gives her a diamond brooch, she grabs frantically at his hands as he attempts to pin it to her dress (although given that



it is strapless and low-cut, her move makes some sense. But it is so awkward!) Marco turns to shut his safe, the safe Cathy is sure contains some vital clue that will exonerate her husband, saying, “I’m so careless.” It sounds like the clanging of a prison door. She has come to investigate, and her curiosity is turned against her. It is the precise turn that Linda Williams articulates in her article, “Why the Woman Looks:” “The woman’s gaze is punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity into masochistic fantasy.”<sup>8</sup> There is a cut away to a close-up of Cathy’s face, tears spilling over and her mouth open as if she had been punched.

Marco turns to get some champagne. Again her reaction is deeply ambivalent. Or rather her reaction is not, but what exactly she is reacting *to* is. He shows her the bottle and says, “Now here is something I’ve been saving for a really special occasion.” Cathy pulls her chin up and smiles bravely through her tears. Gates points to the moment of visual excess linked to the narrative excess of her terrified tear-stained face that seems so out of keeping with the rest of the scene.<sup>9</sup> The amount of distress here seems in a great deal of excess to the event, which, after all, is just some champagne. It is uncalled-for with the implied event—her successful seduction of Marco that will give her access to the information she desires. It is the face of a rape victim, not of a masterful investigator. And this is the moment, ostensibly, when she has taken the most control. She has decided this is the way and she is doing it. One imagines she will close her eyes and think of Kirk or something. “I knew it. I knew it all the time.”

Cathy’s mastery is deeply questionable. She has failed as a wife, as witnessed by her cheating husband, as a woman as witnessed by her need to be made-over, as a singer needing

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” 563.

<sup>9</sup> Gates, *Detecting Women*, 179.

intimate coaching to be fit for public consumption, as a seductress by the hysterical reaction to Marco, as an investigator, she uncovers nothing new, everything she learns is already known. She is good at loyalty. But the film offers no way of understanding it, not with the strangely appealing and clearly attentive Marty near by. Finally, she fails even to be her own person, as in the final moments of the film, we see through Marty's eyes Mavis superimposed over her face. She is literally erased, just as Mavis was. And just as he attempted to makeover Cathy in Mavis's image through the film. Thus, the investigator is literally superimposed by the victim, but the victim is also the villain, and that association to is also attached to Cathy. Everything that is interesting about her is just through association.

There is much that is out of Cathy's control in *Black Angel*. She is the most unsuccessful of our investigators, but that's necessary. It lacks the epic irony and futility of something like *D.O.A.* (Mate, 1950) where the protagonist is investigating *his own murder*. Unless, of course, you read the film Marty's perspective. This is a point of view that the film both embraces and rejects. We are offered several first person shots from his position, but he completely lacks agency. Indeed, what is curious about *Black Angel* is Marty's complete lack of urgency in finding Mavis' killer. He seems to believe Cathy when she asserts that Kirk did not kill his ex-wife. But one would think that his disinterest might clue in Cathy to his ambivalence.

Instead Marty drinks. He drinks in Mavis's rejection, he drinks in her death, he drinks when Cathy rejects him. But *his* methods of investigation are a nightmare. Literally. The case is solved when he drinks himself into such a disaster that he ends up in the county hospital where he reenacts what he did in a dream. It is only in his cups that Marty seems to *do* anything. But he is willing to help Cathy, the form that help takes, however, seems to be making her over in the style of his ex-wife. He has been investigating *his own crime*, thinking he was pursuing a second chance at love.

And that is once again where Cathy comes in. She is the prize to be won: the symbol of purity and loyalty and fidelity. And her investigation is only possible in the face of his utter failure.

If Cathy had not rejected Marty, the case would never be solved. Her *lack* of love, her resistance to his charm is what leads to the answer. *This* is how the solution is reached, not the “hard way”. She solves the crime, not through her own skills as an investigator, but through her fidelity, through loving the right man. Her appropriate allocation of love is the solution. Even though Marty feels that they belong together, Cathy “can only love one man,” the one who cheated on her. But she had stopped trying, the film tells us, as witnessed by her dowdy clothes and little girl hat. There is a way in which the film asks us to understand Cathy as being somehow culpable; not only did she let her man slip away, but this puts him in the vulnerable position he finds himself, blackmailed by his lover and framed for her murder. Kirk’s acceptance of his own guilt is proof of what a good guy he actually is, that *he* doesn’t blame her for his cheating shows what a good guy he is, shows that is really her fault.

I chose to examine *Black Angel* film, rather than Siodmak’s more dynamic adaptation of another William Irish novel, *Phantom Lady*, because of the vivid alignment of the motivation and the means of investigation in *Black Angel*. Thinking about *Black Angel* in relation to Siodmak’s *Phantom Lady* is instructive. The films are very similar.<sup>10</sup> However, I do wish to point to several crucial differences. Doubling the movies highlights certain qualities that might otherwise be ignored. Both films pair a false romance with the investigation. The false romance is with a man who is ostensibly helping her, but is in fact the killer. The fact that she is even in that situation drastically takes away from her authority as an investigator. And the two films handle it in very

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<sup>10</sup> See here Gates discussion in *Detecting Women*, 172-178.

different ways. Relatively early in the investigation in *Phantom Lady*, we see Marlow kill a witness. Marlow is a false lover in several senses. Not only did he have an affair with his best friend's wife, but he killed her. Now he is making up to that same best friend's (the one whom he has framed for the murder) loyal secretary/would-be lover. At this point, and for the rest of the film, we know more than Kansas. It becomes a game to see if she will figure it out before it is too late (for her, before she becomes the next victim, or for Scott before electric chair). But we do see her come to the right answer and organize her own rescue from the killer.

In *Black Angel* on the other hand, neither the audience nor Cathy knows who the killer is. And the other man (in this case Marty Blair—ex-husband of the murdered woman) is far less threatening, and far more appealing. The threat here is that she will fall in love with him rather than that she will be killed by him: melodrama rather than horror. But both films set up a certain kind of equivalency between the two fates. Cheaters never win. Mavis herself gets strangled, Kirk gets sent up the river, even Marco has his most closely-held secret revealed. If Cathy Bennett is able to resist the lure of a new love, she will find success. If she doesn't, she will fail.

In *Black Angel*, there is a great deal that is unspoken, unarticulated. But Cathy's clear attraction for Marty (even as she both uses it and rejects it) blinds her to what is happening. Her willingness to use her own attractiveness on both Marty and Marco is a sign of desperation and strangely of her purity of heart. As long as she doesn't get any pleasure out of it, as long as she feels discomfort and terror, then it can be used as a tool in the arsenal, a weapon of last resort. The question is, what does this lack of mastery have to tell us about the Affective investigator? While Cathy might not have mastery over the investigation, she does have mastery over her own urges. Williams' poses that "...the woman's power to resist the monster is directly proportional to

her absence of sexual desire. Clarity of vision, it would seem, can only exist in this absence.”<sup>11</sup> This is an equation that proved over and over again throughout the films studied here. *The Gift* offers an especially clear cut example. As Annie’s sexual desire rises, her special ability falls.

### 5.3 THE GIFT

*The Gift* is a weigh station of several fascinating careers: Directed by Sam Raimi, perhaps best known for his *Evil Dead* series and more recently the *Spiderman* franchise; Billy Bob Thornton, who had worked with Raimi on *A Simple Plan*, wrote the screenplay, borrowing his mise-en-scene from *Sling Blade* and the main character, it is said, from his mother;<sup>12</sup> Keanu Reeves in an early dramatic role (pre-*Matrix*) and Cate Blanchett, who had not typically starred in genre pictures at that point in her career. In addition, the film features a stable of rather wonderful supporting actors (Hilary Swank, Greg Kinnear, Katie Holmes, Giovanni Ribisi, and J.K. Simmons). As it brings together a disparate group of performers, *The Gift* brings together a diverse set of generic codes, most prominently, the maternal melodrama and horror. The use of an investigating woman allows Raimi to integrate semantic and syntactic elements from these genres without having to rely on the narrative structures of either one; instead the film broadly follows the solution to a crime.

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” 573.

<sup>12</sup> John Kenneth Muir, *The Unseen Force: The Films of Sam Raimi* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2004), 248.

*The Gift* appears on its surface as a southern gothic melodrama that revolves around relationships within a small Georgia town easily identified by the mise-en-scene—trees heavy with Spanish moss, ponds, rivers, and swamps, ramshackle but cozy houses, churches, country clubs, and rusting out K cars, and certain easily identifiable *types* of characters—the abused wife who refuses to leave her man, the promiscuous society girl, the down-home sheriff, the disturbed but sweet grease monkey, the threatening red neck.

There are two dominant generic strains in the film. The first is explicit horror—the main character, Annie, is quite literally haunted by a murdered girl who appears to her in all of her decomposing glory at inconvenient moments: in trees, in the principal's office as she discusses her son's latest fight, in her tub as she is readying to take a bath. The second is the maternal melodrama: everything she does revolves around the fact that she is a mother, both to her own children and in a larger sense to the town itself. She is, as one character tells her, the soul of the town. It is this mother-love that is Annie's defining characteristic, the motivation to set things right, and the willingness to sacrifice everything to it, ironically even the safety of her own children. I am referring here to structures of the maternal melodrama in such films as *Stella Dallas*, *Imitation of Life* and *Mildred Pierce*. However, here, maternal love is less complicated, not in conflict with work. It is through the investigation in fact, through the danger that she becomes an even better mother. The feeling is the same, but the structure is different.

Sarah Arnold has followed this particularly rich generic combination in her book, *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood*. She argues that these films follow the syntactical

construction of the family melodrama even while they have the semantic elements of the horror.<sup>13</sup> But she argues that it is the figure of the *bad* mother that is prevalent in horror films, not the good mother as we see in *The Gift*. This reversal and combination shifts the narrative structure. The mother is not the bad object, it in fact follows the redemptive tale of the maternal melodrama, but the redemption is through an investigative storyline, not a narrative of family melodrama.

Indeed, the entire narrative structure of the film is dependent on a detective story. The resolution of the film is the solution of the crime by our Affective investigator, Annie. It is these other generic pulls and the specific ways they alter and affect the detective narrative that allows us to see how the Affective investigator operates. In *Seers, Witches and Psychics on Screen*, Karin Beeler describes Annie as “a small town psychic who is also a mother of three boys.”<sup>14</sup> This reverses the polarity of importance of her character to the importance of the plot. She is a mother who happens to be a psychic. But the two sides are in conflict with each other. The investigative plot pits her two sides, and the two genres, against each other.

The gothic women’s picture has always worked at the intersection between the melodrama and horror.<sup>15</sup> The difference here is that unlike, say, *Gaslight* or *Rebecca*, Annie is not investigating her husband, trying to assess whether she might have made a very bad decision, rather it is a crime outside of herself. She is investigating a murder that the police, too, find worthy of investigation. However, like the gothics, the Affective investigator depends on her love to

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Karin Beeler, *Seers, Witches and Psychics on Screen: An Analysis of Women Visionary Characters in Recent Television and Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008), 112.

<sup>15</sup> See here Helen Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* (I.B. Tauris: New York, 2007).

resolve the crime. Annie does not ask to be part of the investigation, like the Adventurer, nor is it her job like the Avenger or Comedic investigator. She is herself asked, both by the authorities such as they are, and indeed by the dead woman herself, at least if we can interpret Annie's visions as a plea for help.

### **5.3.1 Answering the Call**

Annie Wilson (Cate Blanchett) is a recently widowed mother of three boys who makes a little extra money by doing psychic readings for her neighbors and distributing good advice. She is pulled into the investigation for a missing woman, Jessica (Katie Holmes) through her knowledge of all the participants and through rumors of her psychic abilities. Jessica's father (Chelcie Ross) comes to Annie for her help accompanied by Jessica's fiancé, the school principal Wayne Collins (Greg Kinnear), and the local sheriff (J.K Simmons). The sheriff resists her help even as he asks her:

“Miz Wilson, I don't believe in what you do. I'll just be straight with you. Not only that, I don't like it. But we've come to the end of the road in our investigation. Looked under every rock there is to look under and we'd like you to tell us what you can to help us. Now, no hocus pocus, chanting and carrying on. We know you talk to a lot of folks, know a lot of folk's business...you mighta heard sumpin'... or sumpin'...”

This perfectly encapsulates the way in which a crime-solving woman is brought into the case: grudgingly and only after all other avenues have been pursued. And even as she is being asked for help, her special ability is being denied. There tends to be something last ditch about the female crime-solver.

Even as we see the narrative line of the detective taking shape, we also see the maternal melodrama invade the frame as we see her son do his homework over her shoulder. The men come



to her home. They are each powerful and yet it is to her home, with its litter of toys, cheap card tables and peeling paint, that they come. This is where the solution is to be sought. In this scene, interestingly, there is no intimation of horror. It is the world of the melodrama and the structure of the investigation. It is only at the very end of the film that all three generic strains are visible at the same time. Having framed her Annie as an investigator, by inviting her into the case, the narrative then takes her investigation and its costs as the primary narrative focus, allowing the intertwining of the maternal melodrama and horror to continue apace.

Annie, like our other investigators, is set apart from other women. Annie is the one we are supposed to admire; she is the hero, the main narrative power. We admire her compassion, her strength, her strong ethical sense, her unwillingness to be cowed by circumstances. She is calm and low-voiced both in tone and register. This low-voiced aspect is seen throughout the movies (Lauren Bacall, for example) to indicate, not a lack of femininity, but a more adult and full-bodied version that is valued by discerning men.<sup>16</sup> The low-voiced woman is the opposite of the hysteric: she is calm, cool, and can work under pressure.

While we do see Annie in the company of women, she is marked as different, as special, as separate. Her acknowledged “gift” is a reiteration of her difference. Throughout the film, her difference is marked, but it is a very specific kind of difference. It is not ambitious, or social climbing, or even dangerous. She is a *better* woman than the rest of them. Annie is contrasted to both Katie Holmes’ character, Jessica: rich, slutty, bitchy, and full of a giggly girlish charm; and

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<sup>16</sup> See here, for example, Elizabeth Cowie’s intriguing intervention in the conflicting way women in Howard Hawks films are represented in her chapter “Feminist Arguments” in *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 26-36.

Hilary Swank's character, Valerie Barksdale: poor, trashy, undiscerning and staying with a man that abuses her physically, emotionally, and sexually, but with a fading cheerleader sexuality displayed in extremely tight pants. Annie, by contrast, is full of down-home wisdom that is only supported and supplemented by her psychic ability, which is portrayed as if it were an innate quality like her hair color or those cheekbones.

Annie has several means of investigation. First and primarily is her own good sense. While she is clearly southern she is not *from* the small town in which she lives, she moved here with her husband. This gives her a sort of clear-eyed yet sympathetic vision of the town and the folks in it. Second, she uses her cards. These cards are not esoteric, but simple shapes and well used: square, circle, plus sign, wavy lines, star. And finally, she has dreams or visions. Sometimes these happen as she reads the cards, sometimes as she goes about her daily tasks. These visions can be overwhelming and are frequently horrifying, even if, as Muir asserts, "her second sight is not the film's central obsession, but simply the instrument, like Sherlock Holmes' powers of deduction, by which she solves a terrible crime."<sup>17</sup> But it is *not* the same. Holmes would certainly reject the analogy. There is history of gendered links between psychic powers and women, and deductive reasoning and men. It is the difference between fiction and reality, melodrama and realism.<sup>18</sup> Mostly what Annie offers people is her undivided attention. It is only when she gets distracted (by

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<sup>17</sup> Muir, *Unseen Force*, 256.

<sup>18</sup> Even though the Holmes stories, themselves, belong firmly to melodrama rather than realism.

pleasure, desire or her own concerns) that bad things happen.<sup>19</sup> It is as if she keeps the world afloat through vigilance.

Annie uses her “gift” to solve the crime. She is a specialist, and this gift is strongly, as all psychic gifts are, intuitive. But unlike many, it takes concentration and determination to see it through even at a great cost to herself because she believes in justice. It is not accidental. When she is interrogated about the ways in which her gift works on the stand during Donnie’s trial for the murder of Jessica, she says, “I see things. I *sense* things that haven’t happened yet or happened someplace else. My Granny told me that I had a gift... That I shouldn’t be afraid of it and I should just use my instinct and I’d be alright.” Her hand flutters around her heart, indicating exactly where she experiences these senses. This is an important turn for the way in which we understand the functioning of the Affective detective. The detective narrative (and indeed patriarchal scopic regimes) depends on vision.<sup>20</sup> What is the difference between “seeing” and “sensing”? The film can only show us what Annie sees, not what she senses. So even while insisting on the vaguer (more feminine) “sense,” what we experience is her vision. But is it something she has mastery over? That is, is she in control of her visions, or is she a vessel for the visions? The fact that it takes *work*, concentration and some sort of ethical use seems to weigh in favor of her being more

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<sup>19</sup> As when Buddy Cole accosts her as she’s leaving the courthouse and asks her why he touches himself when he thinks about his Daddy. And then that evening he sets his dad on fire.

<sup>20</sup> See for example, Christopher T. Raczkowski’s article, “From Modernity’s Detection to Modernist Detectives: Narrative Vision in the Work of Allan Pinkerton and Dashiell Hammett,” (*Modern Fiction Studies* 49.4 2003) in which he explores the way that the Pinkertons developed as a “a systematized network of fully professionalized detectives whose vision makes crime and criminals visible to the State” and Dashielle Hammett’s modernist thematization and problematization of vision (629).

than a mere vessel. The fact that they come to her without her will implies that she does not have mastery over it. This continuing difficulty between seeing and sensing is at the heart of the problems of a woman looking. It is the move from the subject (seeing) to the object (sensing).

The defense attorney wants her to guess how many fingers he's holding behind his back. Then he makes the connection explicit between her and a prostitute: "Maybe it doesn't work unless you're getting paid for it. Like they say in the Army, 'No money, no honey.'" She quietly denies it. But it is a grand scale public humiliation. "I can't use my gift for personal gain." A woman's look is dangerous, but here that danger is looped back around and made immediately dangerous to herself. Her looking puts her in danger. We again come to Linda Williams: She goes on to articulate the difference between when a man looks in the full pleasure of the voyeur and when a woman looks:

First, Nina's look at the vampire fails to maintain the distance between the observer and observed so essential to the pleasure of the voyeur. For where the (male voyeur's properly distanced look safely masters the potential threat of the (female) body it views, the woman's look of horror paralyzes her in such a way that distance is overcome; the monster or the freak's own spectacular appearance holds her originally active, curious look in a trancelike passivity that allows him to master her through *her* look. At the same time, this look momentarily shifts the iconic center of the spectacle away from the woman to the monster.<sup>21</sup>

Annie's vision, this gift that is her power and her strength, becomes the very thing that makes her vulnerable, that puts her in danger,

Donnie gets convicted of the murder based on vivid circumstantial evidence, his own bad nature and Annie's testimony. There is no doubt that Donnie Barsksdale is a bad guy. But he is not *the* bad guy: he is not the killer. And even though it would clearly be to her benefit to leave

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<sup>21</sup>Williams, "When the Woman Looks," 564.

things alone (the law has taken its course), she is not content to do so. Her gift won't let Donnie take the blame for the murder of Jessica King, even though he has repeatedly beaten his wife, punched Annie herself in the face, had affairs and threatened Annie's children. In the logic of the film, he clearly deserves to rot in jail, whether he is actually guilty of this crime or not. But we are supposed to understand her continuation of the investigation as signs of her purity, the way her gift demands self-sacrifice, and the way it is directly in conflict with her maternal instincts. Except that self-sacrifice is at the heart of the maternal melodrama. With Donnie removed as a direct threat to her children, Annie is free to continue her investigation. This move does not lift the generic cues of the maternal melodrama, however, which instead becomes displaced onto Buddy Cole. It is through this relationship and her attempts to help that she is rescued at the end of the film. It is on this aspect of the maternal melodrama that the resolution of the detective narrative line hinges.

If she is the soul of the town, what does that mean? It's not a very nice town, full of violence and sexual misconduct. Sex, itself, is presented as deeply problematic. Jessica's sluttiness leads to her murder. Valerie's sexual dependence leads to her own victimization. Buddy Cole's sexual abuse leads to his complete breakdown. Sex is posed as a problem. This is marked by an early moment in the film. As she is bustling her three sons off to bed, Annie's second son asks, "What does 'fuck' mean, Mama?" "It's a bad word, hon, for something nice." He is not willing to accept this and asks, "But what does it *mean*?" What indeed? Annie has an answer, "It means making love, honey. It's how your daddy and I made your brothers and you." While this question serves to highlight Annie's parental skills—She isn't shocked or offended. She isn't flustered or upset, but down to earth and kind—it introduces the idea of sex to the world of the film. It combines it with notions of questioning and motherhood, of investigation and maternal melodrama.

While Annie is sexualized, (Cate Blanchett is an attractive woman whichever way you slice it and all the ill fitting t-shirts and sweatpants in the world cannot disguise that fact), she has her sexuality under control. She never uses it “inappropriately”(at least in generic terms) to seduce, to flirt, to get what she desires. It is present, but tamped down. And like in horror and indeed many women’s films, her sexuality rising to the surface incites narrative trouble, as we will see. However, the codes of the maternal melodrama smooth out any ideological disjunction in terms of her sexuality. Her love and devotion to her children redeems her, as does her dedication to the damaged man-child Buddy Cole, which literally saves her. This maternal instinct pulls her away from “dangerous” sexual experiences and becomes an extension of her psychic ability.

There are two occasions when Annie’s tamped down sexuality rises to the surface, both with Wayne and both outside of the confines of her world. When, early in the film before Jessica’s disappearance, Wayne asks Annie if she knew that her husband was going to die, the two are having a mildly flirtatious chitchat. Or rather, they are studiously avoiding being flirtatious out in the moonlight outside of the country club. The chemistry between the two has already been noted by the other characters. Annie’s best friend comments on it. The first time Jessica meets Annie as she comes waltzing in to Wayne’s office while Annie is in there for a conference about her son Mike, she senses it. Jessica stares at Annie a couple of second too long, putting Annie firmly in her place. Wayne asks, “Did you know something was going to happen?” as they drink in the moonlight together. She didn’t know there was going to be an explosion at the cable plant he worked at, but she had a bad dream that she was alone, that her husband wasn’t around anymore. She tried to get him stay home from work, but he didn’t. And then the encounter ends as she looks up at Wayne and says, “You kinda remind me of him.” This conversation is about limits: about the limits of her abilities, of polite conversation, and of their attraction. Their rapport is shown in

the ease and depth of their conversation, a rapport in a romance that would mean the inevitability of their eventual connection. Even in a conventional detective film it might point to a plot-stopping sex scene, but in both the melodrama and the horror film it is something to be guarded against.

Later in the film, a few days after the trial for Jessica's murder, Annie goes to Wayne's house. It is a disaster: all the signs, from the week's worth of papers on the front step to the veneer of beer bottles and fast food trays over his furniture, tell us that Wayne is an emotional wreck. But it's a nice house, nicer than hers. She tries to put him to bed, but the mood shifts from the maternal to the sexual. In an intimate moment, reminiscent of the one between Cathy and Marty in *Black Angel*, she sits next to him as he is lying down. He holds her hands, and then reaches up to cup her face. She leans into his touch, the camera closes in an intimate close-up. She resists. "It's not a good idea." She doesn't pretend she doesn't feel what she does, but she "still feels married." She lays her head on his chest for a moment, clearly finding comfort in it. And forgetting why she is there: she is there to offer maternal comfort and investigative support. When he mentions Jessica, the mood breaks, she sits up and tells him that Donnie did not kill Jessica. She doesn't know who did yet, but she will find out. But this moment, this rising threat of sexual desire, leads to greater danger. And when Annie is in danger, the threat is not just to her, but to her fatherless children. She is all they have.

### **5.3.2 Genre: Horror and Maternal Melodrama**

The marketing taglines of the film point to the challenges in articulating how the film works. The first tagline reads, "The only witness to the crime was not even there." This places Annie in the role of witness, a far more passive role than detective, and then even takes that away from her by

denying her existence at an ontological level. She is doubly erased. If she is not *there*, where is she? This situates the film as horror, with its intimations of the supernatural. The second tagline is equally problematic in terms of generic construction: “It was the perfect crime...Except someone saw it all.” This poses the film as a crime film, with its focus on the crime itself, rather than on the solution, the narrative drive of the detective film. And again, there is the emphasis on witnessing rather than solving, a passive act rather than an active one. Neither of these taglines addresses the fact that Annie solves the crime, that it is her pursuit of the truth that unravels the mystery. She did not “see” the crime, in any of the senses that the film asks us to think about the word, neither physically nor psychically, until the end, until the solution, until we have a pretty good idea of what happened from other narrative cues.

Intriguingly, this film is not terribly successful in terms of its narrative strategy, that is, the crime solving structure leads to an obvious solution that is fairly clearly broadcast throughout the film. The mystery is not that much of a mystery. But because of the excessive generic add-ons it becomes successful on very different terms. If these taglines point to the generic complications of the film, how can we unravel them? I argue that *The Gift* is a combination of the horror film, the maternal melodrama and the detective film. Let’s take a moment to unravel the way the film uses these various generic codes.

The use of horror is the clearest. The film is filled with semantic elements from the genre. The tension of the film is built through a combination of ominous suspense and shocking surprises and leads us understand the film as a horror film, even while the overall narrative structure denies it. It *feels* like one. The way that Annie’s gift manifests around the investigation uses horror’s generic cues. She repeatedly and unexpectedly sees the grotesquely decomposing body of Jessica. These always come upon us as a surprise. But these visions haunt Annie, not as revenge but as



clues to the murder investigation. They look like horror but they act like conventional clues. The way the suspense works also seems to be horror, with its slow stalkings and half glimpsed shadows, but those are just red herrings, easily explained away. They are Donnie's boneheaded revenge for Annie's advice to Valerie. Again, they look like horror, but their explanation is melodrama.

While in horror the protagonist/victim/final girl is, as the nomination shows, frequently female, she is not sexual. She is the good girl: smart, clever, and resourceful, but not sexually active. Annie shares many of these qualities, but her status as widow points to both her age, which sets her apart, and her children, which point to a previous sexual history. Instead of horror, her sexuality links her to melodrama. Throughout the film, the genres become entangled and impossible to unravel.

While the build-up of tension has been running to horror (dark and rainy nights, mysterious shadows in windows, etc...), the actual crime and its resolution is much more in keeping with the maternal melodrama. It is in her relation with Wayne that the film's ties to melodrama are the most clear. Instead of the obvious bad guy, her investigation leads her to her own potential love interest Wayne Collins, the principal at her son's school and also the fiancé of the murdered girl. Annie is interested in this man but is denied him. Maternal melodramas tell a woman that she can have a love interest or can be a mother, but not both. Or indeed, you can have a career or you can have a love interest, but not both. Love, it is projected, is simply incompatible with any of the other aspects of a woman's life, even as it is the most important.

It is Annie's concern for Wayne (an uncomfortable admixture of maternal concern and sexual desire which looks a bit like the way romantic love is conventionally portrayed in the movies), as much as her desire for justice that leads her to the solution of the crime. And if she follows her instincts naively (she goes with Wayne on a dark and stormy night to the site of the

murder), she follows them bravely. Jessie was a bad woman who pushed a good man too far. Wayne was weak, but not bad. That is to say, there is a clear psychological explanation for the murder; it is not supernatural in any way. It is not particularly grounded in horror. This is no ax murderer returned from the grave to exact his revenge. And while Wayne did seem willing to kill again to protect his secret, this again is weakness rather than evil. The climax of the film again combines the semantic elements of the maternal melodrama with horror. She is “rescued” by a ghost (horror) of the damaged man-child she tried to help from the man she loves (maternal melodrama). But the climax itself is all detective narrative: it is the solution of the crime.

Wayne implies that his attraction for Annie, as much as Jessica’s mocking and infidelity, lead him to murder Jessica.<sup>22</sup> The film sees this displacement of guilt as unmasculine, as weak. In the same way, Jessica’s attraction for Donnie is seen as a weakness, as a flaw. This solidifies the underlying problems of class throughout the film. There is a strong distrust for wealth throughout the film. The country club is full of decadence (as demonstrated by Jessica having sex in the ladies bathroom) and the DA with whom she was having that encounter is shown as doubly decadent when Annie in her cheap clothes comes to his expensive house where he refuses to address her ethical concerns as he drinks whiskey out of a crystal glass in the library. It is only really in this mode that issues of class are addressed. She is poor but virtuous, that classic melodramatic role. Annie’s class is both a problem and a proof of her purity. If she had wealth, we couldn’t trust her. This is addressed in the courtroom scene where the defensive attorney asks her why she isn’t rich. She says that it doesn’t work that way. Her noble poverty is what makes us trust her. It shows, in

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<sup>22</sup> Being mocked by your lover is apparently justification for murdering her. Marlowe offers the same explanation for why he strangled Scott’s wife in *Phantom Lady*. She laughed at him.

a classic melodramatic move, her purity. Just as Anna's (Lillian Gish) poverty in *Way Down East* showed the same thing. She is not besmirched with filthy lucre. Sex, class, and money create a singularly volatile mix; they are the stuff of melodrama. This assertion of the nobility of the lower class makes critique of the power structures impossible. But the assertion is coupled with the contrasting vision of Donnie and Valerie Barksdale, poor, trashy, violent, trapped. Even Buddy is poor. There is no relief. There is no escape.

Raimi has a deep investment in the conventions of melodrama. And in melodrama, we know something bad is going to happen. Like horror it depends on a certain build up of dread, it is just that the dreaded object is different, as is how we feel about it. If we look back to the maternal melodrama's of the 40s, films like *Stella Dallas* and even *Mildred Peirce*, and certainly Sirk's weepies from the 50s, we dread the dissolution of the heroine, her fall, her humiliation in life and in love and the dissolution of her family that she seems to be barreling towards us at a 100 miles an hour. In horror, we dread the monster triumphing over the heroine. Not coincidentally, it is the heroine we fear for in both genres. And in both genres, the resolution is marked by certain melancholia: the heroine has triumphed but at a cost that must be acknowledged, however briefly, in the end.

The end of *The Gift* offers us just such a moment. Annie and her three boys visit the grave of her husband. Throughout the film we see Annie struggling with the loss of her husband, and at times (as in court) she is even tweaked about not saving him through her "gift" and we see the weight of that knowledge hang on her. Her boys clearly miss their father: her eldest who falls asleep holding the photo album of happier earlier times, even asks why they do not visit his grave more often. Struggling to keep them all afloat, Annie does not seem to acknowledge her own loss; this is marked by her inability to talk about him with her children, look at the snapshots, or sleep.

The film ends with an image, a Laocoon of melodramatic motherhood, her three boys wrapped around her as they visit their dead father's grave, as if the rest of the plot were just a movement towards acceptance of the grieving process.

Annie's return to the normal is coming into her son's room as he's sleeping and seeing him with his father's picture clutched in his hand. She looks through the photo album he has in bed with him and smiles as tears fall down her face. As if all of this were just an elaborate grieving process and now that she can do it properly everything is right with the world. Although Jessica is still dead. And Buddy is still dead. And Wayne is in jail and Donnie Barksdale is still probably out there beating up his wife. All of this is simply the backdrop to the maternal melodrama where she needs to stop letting her own pain come in the way of her mothering. The family that cries over a grave together in the sunshine stays together.

The way in which the two narrative structures are intertwined is through the law. Arnold writes that "[t]he Good Mother recognizes the Law of the Father as legitimate."<sup>23</sup> This is a crucial turn for the female investigator. Even while she is denied full subjecthood by the Law, she still supports it. And here I am again consciously collapsing the Lacanian Law with law and order because it is an elision that occurs on the level of narrative. This matters too here, because Annie does not take the law into her own hands. It is only when it is diverted that she steps in, but she still very clearly operates within the law as she delivers the killer to the police station. I spend so much time here on the maternal because this is the only modality in which motherhood is featured.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Arnold, *Maternal Horror*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> We did see it in The Avenger Chapter as discussed in the reading of *Taking Lives*, but motherhood was clearly problematized. We see it as well in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*

### 5.3.3 On the Ontological Reality of the Supernatural and Genre

While in the Gothic Women's films of the 40s, the supernatural was inevitably explained away,<sup>25</sup> *The Gift* insists on its ontological reality. The things Annie sees are real. And this is the way, once again, that the genres intermingle. Her first psychic clue points the investigation to a pond behind Donnie's house. He (a surprisingly menacing Keanu Reeves) is not only the violent abuser of one of her clients, but has also threatened Annie and explicitly, her children. Protecting your children is the highest virtue in any maternal melodrama. But the means of protection is through her supernatural talents. Because Annie has recourse to the supernatural, thus breaking the boundaries of realism, generically we are led to believe that her danger is in the realm of the supernatural, or that the supernatural will somehow invade the real world. That is, because of her visions and dreams there is nothing to make us think that the horror will stay in the realm of the imaginary. These things become real. But in *The Gift* they do stay in their place, in dreams and visions (for the most part), just their tense specters haunting the frame of the film.

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(Renny Harlin, 1996). But I would argue that its construction is **not** fundamentally around investigation or detective narrative but rather a revenge and redemption narrative, although it does have distinct ties to the early serials like *The Mystery of the Double Cross* in that the woman is the mystery to be solved as well as the main protagonist.

<sup>25</sup> See *Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, *Gaslight*. This idea emerges from Ann McGuire and David Buchbinder's article, "The Forensic Detective: Knowledge, the Supernatural, and the Psychic Detective" (Canadian Review of American Studies, V 40, Number 3, 2010), 291. "While most theorists of the Gothic make a clear distinction between Gothic Novels such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, in which supernatural haunting is understood as ontologically real, and others, such as Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in which the supernatural is explained away in rational naturalistic terms..."

Throughout the film, Annie is almost immediately punished for any flagging of her attention. When she comes home from her night out, there has been an intruder, when she brushes off Billy as she exits the courthouse, he freaks out, sets his father on fire and blames her for not helping him more. When she brushes off her son, she dreams of being strangled. Any momentary lapse of attention is met with swift narrative reprisal. Rather than the tears of the melodrama however, the reprisal manifests as terror. Her failure as a mother *only* comes in relation to her dead husband. Her eldest son asks why they don't go visit the cemetery more (because we know how much thirteen year old boys LOVE going to the cemetery). She tells him that they have been busy, but gets defensive. "But how come we don't even talk about Daddy?" She sends him off to bed, dismissing him, "Go on now, I'm trying to read." In contrast, she is able to handle the question about why she has a bat by the bed with aplomb, "I'm just practicing my swing." As if in punishment for her failure to see to the emotional needs of her son, the next scene shows her being awoken out of sleep with two hands around her neck, strangling her as she reaches fruitlessly for the bedside bat.

Early in the film, as Annie hangs her laundry to dry in the backyard, through the thin scrim of a sheet literally veiling her vision, she sees her grandmother. The intimation is that the grandmother is dead. She offers Annie a warning and a basket full of persimmons and then disappears. For Annie the lines between worlds are permeable. But the question is, can she eat those persimmons? The answer to that would make clear the laws of the world, but the issue is dropped. It hangs ambiguous. There is clearly an intimacy between the "other" world and the domestic. Annie is grounded in the ordinary, in the domestic, in the feminine. Her femininity is never in question. But in a moment, this cozy familiarity can transform into horror. Throughout the film, the ordinary, the domestic, the *mise-en-scene* of the maternal melodrama, becomes

threatening. As Annie sits at a folding card table in a big room that appears to be a porch walled in, a room with her washing machine and a deep sink. The drip of the faucet in the deep sink becomes the dripping of blood. A nighttime check on the dog becomes a confrontation with a corpse in a tree.

Wayne pushes her to investigate at the scene of the crime, there in the night. He encourages her to walk around and see if she picks up anything. She is reluctant, but game and she looks through the misty dark with her flashlight. She trips and drops the flashlight. Wayne rushes to help her and picks up the flashlight. The POV switches from a two shot to a subjective close-up of the flashlight. With the sound of moaning that we recognize from her visions of Jessica, we see a close-up Annie's face caught in the beam of the flashlight. Then there is a cut to a man's arm holding the flashlight coming down in a blow, and other cut to just the arm and the flashlight coming down on the back of Annie's head. Annie's visions get tangled in the moment; past, future and present happen all at once in her perception. The dark of the scene leaching all color out of the current moment. The film cuts back to Annie's face in the light and then to Wayne continuing his motion to help her up. A vision of Annie's face, this time with blood coming from a head wound to the arm upraised with the flashlight about to descend again, cuts to a medium shot of Buddy as the arm continues the trajectory. And then Wayne's voice sounding normal and solicitous saying "Jeez, you alright?" as he helps her up. And this happens in the condensed time of the horror film, ten seconds of screen time from the fall to her regaining her feet. But from here on in, the line between the present and her visions runs thin. The camera angles become more threatening.

In a daze, Annie walks back up the embankment from the pond and begins to step over a fallen tree. We are given a close up of her face with the look we have come to associate with her visions and then a shot of Jessica's almost naked body falling on the ground, and then a close-up

of Annie's eyes. A vision of the past is superimposed over this close-up: we see Jessica getting into her little sports car. She turns as a car pulls up and strangely we (and presumably Annie) are in the POV of the person driving the car. The image dissolves into Annie lying on the ground struggling to get up as Wayne's jean-clad legs walk into the frame in slow motion indicating that this is not the present, but the future. Annie's face pulls out of the dissolve to keep us oriented that this is Annie's vision. Another dissolve to Jessica shows us her as she walks up with a smile and says, "What are you doing here?" A cut to Annie's face and a cut to Jessica's sprawled naked body. The scene goes on like this, forward into the future, showing Annie the danger and back into the past showing Jessica's danger and the result, all anchored through Annie's face, her eyes, interspersed with previous moments in the film. Through this series of visions it is revealed that Wayne is the killer. We see again her moment of her own dream of strangulation that coincided with the actual event. Jessica and Annie are linked. But even as she realizes it, he sees it on her face and confesses it. She tries to deny her knowledge, and then asserts that she won't tell anybody about it. This goes against everything we know about Annie at this moment. Her fear is visible. He assures her that he "wanted her to see it. I'm not a killer...If it had been you with me instead of her than none of this would have happened." As if it were somehow Annie's fault. And then Wayne assaults her. We see again in real time what we glimpsed moments ago in her vision. Annie is on her hands and knees, helpless. And as Wayne is about to bring down the flashlight in what looks like a would-be the killing blow, Buddy is there to catch his hand. Buddy punches Wayne out, and Buddy stands there, strong in a low angle shot as lightning crackles behind him. Once again, Annie looks up from the submissive position on her hands and knees.

This flattening of the past, present and the future, is also the visible combination of the generic codes. The horror depends on what will happen in the future, the melodrama on the past



and the detective story is squarely in the present (see here both Williams and Todorov). Each genre has its own way that it occupies time, just as each genre has a recognizable mise-en-scene. And in *The Gift* it is the intersections of mise-en-scenes as well as chronotopic constructions that identify the generic conjunctions.

Buddy Cole is the undisclosed third term. What do we do with Buddy, disturbed man-child that takes on so much importance at the end of the film? An important moment happens early in the film. Annie goes to Buddy at the garage he works at because the lock on her door is broken and the door keeps swinging open as she drives (is this a metaphor?). Buddy assures her that even though she's low on money she doesn't have to worry about it because she's "the only one that's a friend" to him. On the drive home in his tow truck, he totally freaks out. First he says he's happy and then he slams on the breaks and starting talking about a blue diamond and killing himself. She murmurs comforting things as he weeps and hands him a bit of baby toweling for him to fix himself up with. He is a failure of parenting, the sign of the rot at the heart of the town and his redemption is the redemption of the town. Everyone in town is culpable.

Buddy could not have saved her. Buddy was already dead when the encounter happens. This is a different scale of things than having visions; this is a direct intervention. He saves her life. He saves her life because she deserves it. The flip side of this is that Jessica did not deserve to be saved; this point of view is expressed aloud by more than one character within the film, as if being slutty and bitchy makes you earn your own violent murder. But we are hardly surprised by this; only someone as good as Annie could see the good in someone as bad as Jessica.

If we think of Buddy in terms of chronotopes of genres rather than in terms of plot, however, he begins to make sense. His fluidity is a necessary tool of generic combination: he exists in the past, present and future as well. He is caught in the spaces between these moments. He was

never quite in the present, trapped as he is in his hazy traumas. As a result Buddy has no path to the future; he commits suicide. But between these two frames, between the fear of the future that is horror and the trauma of the past that is the maternal melodrama, he is able to slip through and save Annie Wilson, to rescue her so she can share the truth. After she and Buddy have dragged Wayne's body back up to the car and dumped him in the trunk, they sit in the front seat and talk. Buddy is calm and clear-eyed. "You're the soul of this town, Miz Wilson. You just need to keep doing what you been doing." When she apologizes for letting him down, he replies, "You're the only one who was a friend to me and I love you." Gone are the manic mannerisms of earlier in the film. But why Buddy? As a storyline, we wondered about him throughout the film. She failed to save him. So why is he there, what role does he fill? Is he just there to be supernatural rescuer?

The ending forces us to trust Annie's vision even as it removes her mastery and autonomy. She is both rescued and not rescued. It is *deus ex machina*. Is her gift ontologically real? Does it allow people who love her to literally step from beyond the grave into the world of the living? Could she eat those persimmons her dead grandmother gave her? The gift works through her; she is a worthy conduit. This just seems to reify the old chestnut of "woman as vessel."<sup>26</sup> This makes navigating exactly how much mastery she has even more crucial. Certainly she does not do anything that looks like typical detective work. She does not, as the sheriff puts it, look under every rock there is to look under. She does not, as Cathy does, go out into the world to track down the killer. She sees. She senses. She "feels" things. "Feeling," itself, is a word laden with meanings: the sense of physical touch, an emotional reaction, and a belief (often irrational). It is concrete,

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<sup>26</sup> We can think here of the way female saints like St. Teresa of Avila are figured as filled with vision (transverberation), as a passive occurrence; it is something that happens to them. While male saints such as John the Apostle who actively had visions.

affective, psychic. This triadic meaning is emphasized throughout the film. When Annie reads the cards, her long hands rest over them, her fingertips barely touching them. It implies a physical sensation to the psychic and connections the meanings of “feel.” But it is distinctly the emotional reaction, the affective meaning that ties the two and anchors Annie’s narrative trajectory.

## 5.4 CONCLUSION

*The Gift* is not structured as a maternal melodrama nor as horror for largely for the same reason: the supernatural is figured as ontologically real and the narrative structure follows an investigation of a crime. In terms of the maternal melodrama Annie is a good mother at the beginning, middle and end. She is not forced to give up her children nor to make some sort of grand sacrifice for them (although the resolution hinges on her improved relationship with them). Nor does the film function like a horror film, with its repeated stalkings and murders that are finally unraveled as the plucky heroine escapes and defeats the killer (although it incorporates these elements). And unlike the horror film, the power of the supernatural is not evil in the context of the narrative, even while it can be terrifying. Instead the film, narratively, functions like a detective story. A world is disrupted by a crime, and after a few red herrings, the detective finds the perpetrator and hands him over to justice. But it is impossible to ignore these other generic qualities: the semantic cues and affective pulls. The character who holds the genres together, who is the site of intersection, is the figure of the investigating woman; in herself, she holds these two sides: the psychic and the mom, horror and melodrama.

Just as the genres intermingle, and the worlds intermingle, so too, as in *Black Angel*, the distinction between the investigator and the victim is erased, is super-imposed, is visually melded. Once again, the victim is a bitch, a bad woman to demonstrate what a good woman the investigator is, even while all women are equated. And as in *Black Angel* and *Phantom Lady*, the would-be investigative partner and potential love interest is the murderer.

Annie has a great deal of integrity, as witness to her refusal to let Donnie Barskdale rot in jail, where he belongs. Unlike some other detectives, especially the classic *noir* investigation, Annie's sense of justice is acute. Donnie did not commit the crime he was convicted of, therefore he shouldn't be in jail. It is not right. Even as we can list all of the reasons that he should stay there, not least of which is the almost inevitable reprisals to her and her family that will come. In this she is quite different from Cathy in *Black Angel*. One gets the distinct sense in that film that if Cathy could frame someone else for Marvis's murder she wouldn't hesitate to do so. She would do anything (*anything!*) to free her husband. Annie's case is different. And perhaps it has to do with the *kinds* of love she is motivated by. That is, the difference between romantic love and maternal love shift the possibilities. The only reason Cathy isn't a femme fatale in defense of her husband is that she hasn't figured out how to do it. It's not in her nature, even if it might be her desire.

The maternal isn't exclusive to the affective mode. It can be transformed into an Avenger just as easily, as in Sally Field's *An Eye for an Eye*. But there, the question is not who did it, we know exactly who did it, but will he face justice, or will she find revenge? These are a different set of questions. The figure of the investigating woman depends on the unknown, on her uncovering the perpetrator of the crime. The wrong answer, the wrong man gets under her skin and will not let her rest. It is not always as dramatic as finding the ghost corpse of a murdered woman screaming, "Fuck you" at you as you go to take a bath as happens to Annie after Donnie

is convicted. This, we imagine, is what convinces her that Jessica has not found justice yet: Jessica's anger. Annie's motherhood is unique. Her sons are alive, are present and are not the focus of the narrative. She is. Her independent action is the center of the action.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION: TELEVISION AND THE FEMALE DETECTIVE

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout this dissertation, I have developed a way of thinking about the female detective that accounts for her lack of generic stability, even while she is a recognizable figure. To that end, I have built a sort of taxonomy of four modes: The Adventurer, The Avenger, the Comedic, and the Affective. Each of these modes articulate certain dominant strains, generic combinations and moods in Hollywood representations of the investigating woman and the narrative disruption she seems to leave in her wake.

In this conclusion, I wish to test the modalities in the laboratory of television. Television has been a far happier and more stable home for the woman detective than film: “Television can be said to have led the cinema in positioning women in the role of investigator and in demonstrating the commercial viability of the female cop character.”<sup>1</sup> Since 1957, shows featuring a woman detective have found a home on American televisions: *Decoy: Police Woman* (1957-58), *The Avengers* (1961-69) *Honey West* (Anne Francis 1965-66), *Policewoman* (1974-1978),

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<sup>1</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 94.

*Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981), and an array of female sidekicks. It is with the debut of *Cagney and Lacey* in 1981 (not incidentally the same year *Hill Street Blues* debuted and, like it, the program marks a new wave of quality TV dramas) that female detective shows have exploded. During the 80s, we saw *Remington Steele* (1982-87), *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996) and *Moonlighting* (1985-89) just to name a few of the most successful and popular. Today you can hardly turn on your television without coming across an investigating woman, alone, in a team, as part of an ensemble. Conventional wisdom tells us that it is only with the rise of "quality TV" in the '80s and '90s, that narrative complexity increases. However throughout the televisual history of the woman detective we can see she has been marked by generic instability and as a result cycles through the modalities from episode to episode and even within episodes.

To begin to capture the range of televisual representations of investigating women protagonists, I will begin by looking at *Decoy*, the first program to feature a woman detective and examine the ways the conflicting generic imperatives of realism and melodrama push the program into strange shapes but also serve as its engine. We will see the way the protagonist of the program shifts among the four positions of the Adventurer, Avenger, Comedic and Affective investigators, but that at this early moment within the confines of a half hour series these positions are not yet fully developed. Finally, we will begin to see the way issues of performance are vital to the televisual investigating woman. These ideas will be more fully developed as I turn my attention to a contemporary iteration of the investigating woman with *Veronica Mars*. We will see how the program activates not only competing genres, but different scholarly and industry appellations from Quality TV to Cult. Most critically, we will see the way these elements combine to let the program shift among all four modalities in a single episode. Perhaps the most widely known

program featuring investigating women, *Cagney and Lacey*, will to serve as the connection between these two very different programs from very different eras.

Serial television's insistent resistance to narrative closure offers a challenge to the generic imperatives of the detective story, which depends upon it. But our pleasure in recurring characters has long led detective stories in print to serialization. It is worth a moment here to articulate what we mean by narrative closure, both in terms of the detective story and in terms of serialized television, especially since so many literary detectives exist in series where each plot is self-contained. While detective stories and serialized television function in similar ways, they are not identical. It is the moment of their intersection, and of the gap between them, which is the space of the televisual female detective and will help us articulate why she is so successful on television when her appearance on film has been inconsistent, at best.

In "Closure in Detective Fiction," Eyal Segal offers a very useful discussion of narrative, narrativity and closure. The detective story has always been associated with strong narrative closure, "the overall narrative structure and effect of the detective story depend upon the ending—and particularly the manner in which this ending produces a typically strong closure."<sup>2</sup> Using Meir Sternberg's idea of narrative interest in three types—suspense (awareness that something will happen in the future, propection), curiosity (information gaps about events in the past, retrospection) and surprise (a lack of expectation about events in the past, recognition)—Segal defines closure as the cessation of narrative interest by filling in the informational gaps of the text. In contrast, narrative openness would leave significant gaps in a reader's knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Feminist

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<sup>2</sup> Eyal Segal, "Closure in Detective Fiction." *Poetics Today* 31:2 (Summer 2010) 154.

<sup>3</sup> Segal, "Closure," 160-162.



film scholar, Annette Kuhn, on the other hand, defines closure as the “restriction of the ranges on meaning potentially available from a text.”<sup>4</sup> Openness has been associated in film theory with the possibilities of reading against the grain of the text, of the text exceeding its own boundaries and thus allowing for the possibilities of feminine and feminist readings.

## 6.2 *DECOY*: AN ACTING JOB WITHIN AN ACTING JOB

*Beverly once told a reporter that being a decoy for the police is a dangerous job—especially for a woman. Casey had to act and a bad performance by her could mean death. Her assignments take her everywhere, into all walks of life. She has to look the part as well as act it. It’s an acting job within an acting job.*<sup>5</sup>

Even as the contemporary televisual landscape is rich in investigating women, *Decoy*, the first television series about a woman detective remains largely unknown in popular and scholarly conversations. Premiering in 1957, each half-hour long episode features Casey Jones, a New York City policewoman (Beverly Garland<sup>6</sup>), as she goes undercover to solve a case. *Decoy* was not only the first show about a policewoman, but Beverly Garland was the “first actress in the history of

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<sup>4</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. (Verso: New York: 1982), 197.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Del Vecchio, *Beverly Garland: Her Life and Career* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2012), 62

<sup>6</sup> In addition to being a regular feature in Roger Corman films (*Gunslinger*, 1956; *Swamp Women*, 1955; and *It Conquered the World*, 1956), she played Fred McMurray’s second wife in *My Three Sons* and played Amanda King’s mother Dotty West in *The Scarecrow and Mrs. King* (1983-1987) and Laura Holt’s mother on *Remington Steele* (1982-1987). Garland’s TV credits are truly extensive.

American television to star in the title role of a full-season dramatic series.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Julie D’Acci offers this startling statistic: “Between 1949 and 1990, there were only approximately 36 dramatic TV series (out of roughly 555) that starred women—in which, that is, a woman was the subject of narrative action, the protagonist, and did not co-star with a man.”<sup>8</sup>

In *Decoy*, Casey Jones is a fully realized female detective in the 1950s, a decade when the figure virtually disappears from film. The attempt to contain the female detective through often uncomfortable generic combinations occurs wherever she appears on film or television because of the ideological discomfort her looking (both on the level of narrative and on the level of the apparatus) creates. *Decoy* provides a fascinating intervention in our existing understanding of women detectives. The program’s instability, an uneasy clash between melodrama, realism, and self-reflexivity, exceeds boundaries of the detective genre. Dick Wolf once said, “*Dragnet* is the father of us all.”<sup>9</sup> Then who is the mother of the modern TV detective? While the metaphor leaves something to be desired, *Decoy* is the fierce and eccentric aunt. The program is endlessly fascinating, and clearly related to modern iterations of the televisual investigator.

*Decoy* is a series and not a serial. There is no real continuing story arc, a textual feature that is associated with soap operas, and women’s programming more generally. Casey Jones does not, for example, advance in her career or develop relationships. There are no mysteries that continue over multiple episodes, no criminal mastermind that appears more than once. Each

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<sup>7</sup> Everett Aaker, *Encyclopedia of Early Television Crime Fighters* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 227.

<sup>8</sup> Julie D’Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 107.

<sup>9</sup> See R. Barton Palmer, “*Dragnet*, Film Noir, and Post War Realism,” in *The Philosophy of TV Noir*, eds. Steven M. Sanders and Aeon J. Skoble (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), 33 (and n1, 47).

episode is a complete and discrete mystery. Her superiors and co-workers, while they occasionally recur, do not develop nor do we ever learn anything about them. While this does keep the focus squarely on Casey, it does not offer the pleasures of the serial. However, whenever we do learn some small scrap of personal information about Casey, it carries a great deal of narrative power.

*Decoy's* highly melodramatic plotlines are situated within a rather grim police-blotter realism highlighted by the New York location shooting and performances clearly influenced by the method school. Yet the program never fully privileges either melodrama or realism and so does not suit either/or criticism or the claims to progressiveness inherent in either. The melodramatic stories allows the program to address complex social issues from mental illness to addiction to the crushing psychological challenges of disabilities to the particular difficulties of class.

Despite its complex history, as we have seen, the term “melodrama” has historically been used to dismiss women’s stories as not realist, as too much. But it is in the supposed realist moments that there is narrative excess. At the end of each episode, Casey returns to her default policewoman stance and directly addresses the camera, musing on the moral implications of the case. This is not a progressive self-reflexive breaking of the fourth wall, but instead a way to assure the viewer that the show is just a show.<sup>10</sup> However, the toughness of her persona and her steady gaze into the camera creates a tension of looking coupled with the mastery of her voice-over throughout the program. This tension parallels the tension between realism and melodrama.

Douglas Snauffer begins his book *Crime TV* by making a claim for the genre’s realist stake: “In many ways, crime dramas, whether they’ve focus on uniformed police officers and

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<sup>10</sup> See Jane Feuer’s “The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012), 543-557.

private investigators, have more closely mirrored actual society than any other genre.”<sup>11</sup> Probably the most important crime show of the 1950s was *Dragnet*. While the history of *Dragnet* is fascinating in its own right, what is important here are certain tropes it established to which *Decoy* speaks. Snauffer writes that “*Dragnet* usually picked up after the commission of a crime and focused on the investigation. Therefore audiences were exposed to a minimum of violence.”<sup>12</sup> Or at least, the violence is only referred to and not seen. Violence on television became a public concern by the early 50s, complete with repeated Congressional hearings on the subject. As such it was a good model of *Decoy*, where the violence, while always threatening, is almost always off-screen. But the most important connection is the voice-over narration, a stylistic move that *Decoy* emulates. A remnant perhaps of its incarnation as a radio show, Jack Webb’s voice-over gave the audience a sort of insider access to the crime solving process. We get to ride along, to understand not just what was happening, but why. The voice-over anchors the program and orients the action. We will see the way that voice-over serves a different function in *Decoy*; it shifts the emphasis from action to reflection, from masculine to feminine.

Performance is a vital key to understanding this show, both performance as acting, and performing certain kinds of femininity. Despite the seeming invitation to a sort of sexual excess that going undercover seems to offer (and the provocation of the program’s title “decoy), Casey never uses her sexuality directly, but rather as credibility. Women trust her sense of experience and almost every episode is centered around a woman. Casey’s sexuality is always deferred and distanced. When she does use her femininity as a tool directly against men, it tends to be the

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<sup>11</sup> Douglas Snauffer, *Crime Television* (Westport, CN, Praeger Publishers, 2006), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Snauffer, *Crime Television*, 9.

vulnerable, wounded damsel-in-distress variety, wielded with precision. This overt concern with femininity would situate the program as melodrama. But each performance is carefully modulated for the class context in which she is operating, which is the realm we associate with realism. Casey is a professional. *Decoy* clearly presents her doing a job, and she is clearly part of a team. She is assigned these cases within the diegesis, that is, her skills and sexiness are very much contained within the context of the NYPD. The solution to the cases revolves around love, frequently unrequited. Sad lovely women are the crux on which the narrative turns. And Casey has a special gift for dealing with them.

Casey's hairstyle becomes more than an element of the mise-en-scene; it is, in itself, a kind of performance, performing a semiotics of status, of class, of sexuality. It marks her transition from policewoman to whatever character she is playing. This elevation of the mise-en-scene from realism to a load-bearing performative visual cue is more in line with our understanding of a Sirkian melodrama. As policewoman, she wears her hair severely pulled back with a short thin fringe of bangs in the front. When she goes undercover, her hair might come down, in a sophisticated loose wave striped with a dramatic highlight in the front, either blonde or white, it is impossible to tell. The lower the class that her case takes her, the bigger the hair. Her clothes get tighter, her walk gets hipper, her jewelry more noticeable. As she rises up the social ladder her hair becomes more controlled, from a smooth Grace Kelly style as she plays a society girl, to a full turban when she plays a woman who inherits an import/export business. For Casey, class is clearly a performance in a way that we are more familiar with thinking about gender, a permeable boundary, which orients us towards realism. However, this program highlights how inextricably linked ideas of femininity and ideas of class really are. But these issues of performance intersect with the issues around melodrama, realism and genre in very intriguing ways.

If the semiotics of hair pulls us into melodrama and the woman's picture, than the iconography of the gun activates male-oriented action. Each episode seems to feature at least one moment where Casey is handling or shooting a gun. No one doubts her ability. And she is always armed. It becomes a topic of conversation. In one episode, Casey returns to the gun shop where she purchased her first gun years before only to have the owner remember her, and her gun. There is a wonderful moment in "Blind Date," where her lieutenant swaps out her gun in her purse. She says that her role as negotiator she might have a gun (she does not want to be without one as she negotiates a deal to launder some money). And again, this isn't in question. He just dryly observes that in her role she probably wouldn't have a service revolver. But intriguingly, it is not over eroticized here. It is simply a tool of her trade.

I'd like to situate my discussion of *Decoy* in a close reading of the episode "High Swing." It originally aired on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1958 and was directed by David Alexander and written by Don Ettlinger.<sup>13</sup> It aired about mid way through the season, 25<sup>th</sup> out of 39. Each episode is "Presented as a tribute to the Bureau of Policewomen, Police Department, New York City." The programs purported, like *Dragnet* to be based on true stories and had a NYPD policewoman, Margaret Leonard, Det. 1<sup>st</sup> Grade (ret.) NYPD on staff as a technical advisor throughout its run. The storylines run the gamut: the program takes us on a journey through New York City, from the Upper East Side and Central Park South to the tenements, warehouses and even Coney Island. We get to have the pleasure of seeing exotic worlds with Sgt. Casey Jones as our guide through the underbelly that runs through it. The television crime drama has always been interested in morality

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<sup>13</sup> Both Alexander and Ettlinger worked on other episodes of the program. Alexander was a producer as well as a director. I chose this episode because it is typical and firmly situated within the regular aesthetics of the show.

and social order. It was in the mid-1950s that filmed dramas came into prominence with all of the freedom that entailed. And *Decoy*, like *Dragnet* before it, takes advantage of that freedom.

“High Swing” begins with the sound of an ambulance and the vision of one speeding around a corner. We see an image of Casey in her uniform hat, her hair confined and curling tidily around her ears. She is looking solemn against a plain background accompanied by her voice-over: “This was a routine job for a policewoman. At least I thought it was routine.” We move back to an image of Casey riding along in an ambulance and a girl on the stretcher suffering an overdose and asking to see “Otto.” Mumbling how he didn’t mean to hurt anyone and averring that she didn’t take any dope, she claims all she had was a cup of coffee.

Suddenly, it isn’t routine. You’re listening. Hard.

Age: About 20. Occupation: Come-on Girl. She didn’t get much out of life but what she left behind was important. A name: Otto Flagman.

I’d like to spend a bit of time just parsing this opening scene. It’s very efficient, as the show always is, each episode running a swift 26 minutes for a full case. It begins with realism, with the ambulance, the uniform, the city streets, the small tragedy of addiction. This is the routine of the voice-over. The voiceover works to evoke both the urban milieu of *film noir* and of *Dragnet*. Casey offers the same tough-voiced clipped tones, her voice a deeper register than when she is speaking within the diegetic world. There is a history of the low-voiced woman, from Lauren Bacall to Cate Blanchette. They are considered exceptional, competent strong, independent, in direct contrast with the breathy squeaks or high-pitched babbling of other female characters. They are cool girls (to borrow from recent work by Anne Helen Peterson.<sup>14</sup>). While the character of Casey Jones is

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/jennifer-lawrence-and-the-history-of-cool-girls>

operating outside of these contours, she is still contained within them. A high-pitched voice could not have pulled off the text she has to say.

But we are still firmly in the realist mode. What *is* unique here in all the depictions of the televisual woman detective is the way in which the professional, the cop-part, is the frame of the show rather than the woman-part. This is an unusual move, although the original six episode first season of *Cagney and Lacey* opening credits had the partners in full uniform and showed a mini narrative about their rise to detective. The softer second season with Meg Foster replaced with the more feminized Sharon Gless as *Cagney* features opening credits that highlight the glamor of New York City and showing the two women window shopping and interspersed with jaunty paneled portraits of the them over images from the mise-en-scene. From the first to the second season they move from gang crimes and protecting an opponent of the ERA to investigating beauty salons even as the program keeps an explicitly feminist voice at work in the show. Even the precinct and the city are less gritty and filthy. Currently, it seems that firmly ensemble based shows like the *CSI* franchise or the *Law & Order* franchise will focus more squarely on the professional life of the female cast members whereas shows more firmly based on a female protagonist *Bones*, *The Closer*, *Medium*, will spend considerably more time on the personal life of the heroine.

*Decoy* stands on a solid base of professional competency marked by “routine.” The professional police officer is almost always understood as male, and certainly it is at this time. So here we have a masculinized image in a genre strongly understood as masculine. At the same time, she is speaking to *us*, humanizing her, and her job. And almost immediately the “routine” realism opens up into melodrama. The girl who overdosed is riding in the back of an ambulance, sweating and delirious. The image is familiar both from the woman’s picture where Doane in *The Desire to Desire* saw the medicalized melodrama as one of its fundamental modes, and to *Decoy* where we



see the image of bed-ridden and damaged woman repeatedly.<sup>15</sup> Doane sees this trope functioning as a sort of conversion hysteria, linked to women's perceived over-identification with the screen.<sup>16</sup> However, here the identification is displaced. We do not identify with the symptomatic woman (victim or villain), but she is always present.

The particular girl in "High Swing," Annie, calls out a name, Otto. This, too, is a familiar trope within the context of the show and of the woman's picture. It is the aural sign of woman's (often self-destructive) desire. In *Decoy*, women frequently end up in the hospital, suffering, and asking for the man who put her there.<sup>17</sup> It is in the storyline, in the crimes that Casey investigates, that the melodrama lays. That is, it does not borrow the *structure* of the narrative from the melodrama, but does use many of the semantic elements. The stories are familiar to us from women's pictures. I would like to be careful, here, not to elide the difference between melodrama and the woman's picture despite their explicit overlap in this program. However, the victimization of women is where they intersect.

To return to the opening, we still must wrestle with the form of address, the "you" ("Suddenly you're listening..."). The program works very hard to create an identifying alliance with Casey that will be reinforced in the direct address of the ending. 1957-8 television was filled with Westerns, variety shows and sitcoms, but nothing quite like *Decoy*. But who is the "you" who is being addressed here? The unidentified "you," appealing to everyone and no one is exactly the

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<sup>15</sup> See for example "Cry Revenge," "Blind Date," "Saturday was Lost," "Ladies Man" and "The Sound of Tears."

<sup>16</sup> Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> In the episode, "Ladies Man," for instance, a woman thought she was taking a picture with a hidden camera for her insurance adjusting boyfriend but really shot his wife before throwing herself in front of a train when she realized what she had done and losing both her legs and is still asking after the man who fooled her.

moment of generic and gender complexity. Is the “you” a woman, a cop, the audience? It is certainly not the stereotyped image of the woman from the 50s, the suburban married wife, or of the women’s pictures of the 50s. Casey Jones is quite definitively none of those things. Nor is she a man. She is, in fact, quite different from her masculine counter parts in 1950s crime dramas, both in her gendered performance, and in her method of investigation. Where she is perhaps most like them is in her full commitment to her job, which evokes a Hawksian woman. But even explicitly feminist texts like Andrea L. Press’s *Women Watching Television: Gender Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* make claims that women were only portrayed within the domestic sphere in “pre-feminist” times and that images of working women emerged only in the late 60s and early 70s.<sup>18</sup> *Decoy* shows that this simply was not the case. While it might not have been the most popular or successful show, it did air in 1957 and for many years in re-runs. It might be an outlier, but it does exist. Indeed, Cary O’Dell’s aggressively provocative book, *June Cleaver Was a Feminist!: Reconsidering the Female Characters of Early Television* devotes a whole chapter to working women in early television. From secretaries to schoolteachers to nurses and reporters, he makes a compelling case to their existence, at any rate, before Mary Richards.<sup>19</sup>

Ien Ang begins her influential article, “Melodramatic Identification: Television Fiction and Women’s Fantasy,” with an evocation of two figures who also seem to escape from stereotypical definitions of femininity, and whom we can certainly consider investigating women: Christine Cagney from *Cagney and Lacey* and Maddie Addison from *Moonlighting*. She uses Cagney,

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<sup>18</sup> Andrea L. Press, *Women Watching Television: Gender Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 145.

<sup>19</sup> See Cary O’Dell, *June Cleaver Was a Feminist!: Reconsidering the Female Characters of Early Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2013).

especially, as a foil for her discussion of Sue Ellen from *Dallas*. She establishes a series of oppositions between the two characters, but one of the central is that Sue Ellen exists in a melodramatic context of soap opera and Cagney is (unstated) realist (although she vividly points to the fact that no fictional character is a “realistic image of women”.) Ang ends with the following observation:

Despite the fact that Christine Cagney is an independent career woman who knows where she stands, she too must at times face the unsolvable dilemmas inherent in the lives of modern women: how to combine love and work; how to compete with the boys; how to deal with growing older...Often enough, she encounters frustration and displays a kind of cynical bitchiness not unlike Sue Ellen's. I would argue that some of the most moving moments of *Cagney and Lacey* are those in which Cagney gives in to the sense of powerlessness so characteristic of the melodramatic heroine.<sup>20</sup>

It is these very moments of navigating the work/life balance that *Decoy* never offers us. We never see the “life” part of Casey. Casey herself seems remarkably free of ambivalence or conflict between her job and her private life. But this is because her private life is erased. It is invisible. Does this make the portrayal less realist? Or less melodramatic? She has no problem staying undercover for days on end, no one to check in with, no child or husband or even lover to account to. She doesn't even have a plant to water, a cat to feed or a mother to worry.

Casey is not just a fantasy of woman: the highlighting of performance assures us of that. While Casey can *play* the vamp, she isn't one, just as she isn't an addict, or an out of work actress, or an office girl, or an heiress. Her performance of sexuality does not define her any more than any other performance she offers. Cop remains her core identity, the one returned to at the end of each

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<sup>20</sup> Ien Ang, “Melodramatic Imagination,” on M.E. Brown, ed., *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular* (Newbury Park: Sage Press, 1990), 166.

episode. What being a cop means to a woman, how these identities merge, or don't, is a question that television will not attempt to answer for another twenty-five years.

Where soap operas diverge from the women's picture is not in their address but in their constructions, their lack of beginnings and endings. *Decoy* is most certainly governed by a female point of view (and nothing orients us more firmly than the framing direct address of each episode) but it is *not* particularly interested in female desire. Or rather, once again, the desiring women, like the medicalized women of melodrama, are displaced onto the characters in traditionally feminine roles, victims and villains. In terms of both audience and spectatorship, the program's address is particular complex. Who is Casey speaking to at the end of each episode? Who is *Decoy* for?

Just as the address is uncertain and unstable so is the character of Casey Jones. There are several reasons for this: first, she is the first female policewoman protagonist. She is new. She is different. She is unique. She is a landslide, to borrow a term from the press book. Thus, she is not a stereotypical figure. As detective, she is not male and as woman she is not victim. This is both exacerbated and ameliorated by the fact that she goes undercover each episode. Who is she performing for? In each episode she is performing for the small audience of her undercover operation. But she is also performing for us, a fact which is directly referenced here. Her stable identity is undermined by the quality of her performances and the way that they produce a wide variety of feminine affects. So once again, we have the melodramatic move of undercover, but the realist move of highlighting the performance *as* performance, with moves that are not precisely Brechtian but evoke him through rapid shifts of persona that disrupt the inevitability of an inherent self and the invisibility of acting.

Where traditionally, daytime TV was thought to be the domain of women's television we are left with *Decoy*, evening programming featuring a woman protagonist in a masculinized genre.

Its in-between status is typical of the woman detective. But in a certain way, it is its most basic conflict. We cannot quite understand it as a woman's show (to wildly appropriate a term) nor as a man's. We cannot easily understand it as melodrama or as realism.

In her book, *Ladies of the Evening: Women Character of Prime-Time Television*, Meehan lays out a series of female character types that she sees as dominating TV from 1955-1980. These range from "the imp" to "the goodwife," from "the siren" to "the matriarch." She describes the women one typically saw on *Dragnet* as "the bitch."

The bitch was strong-willed, selfish, and destructive. Her schemes were self-serving, as were her standards... Yet her crimes were minor; she lacked the vision and power to be truly evil ... *Dragnet's* bitch was intruding, and troublesome, interfering with important business of crime-fighting and peace-keeping. Yet, she was not opposition but interruption. In spite of the danger her interference posed, as distraction during a shoot-out, Officer Smith and Sergeant Joe Friday dismissed her as a mild annoyance. Neither police officer bothered to explain the situation, treating her with mock politeness instead.<sup>21</sup>

This was the position of women in the police drama (and still remains on some programs). The shift of women from the outside of the action to the inside of the action, to being participants in the action marks *Decoy* as substantially different from any program that preceded it. Although Meehan is similarly dismissive of *Decoy*. "She was a hero by intent if not by action."<sup>22</sup> So while she shared many traits with a male hero, her vulnerability marked her as different; she was frequently in need of rescue. "She was unique in television programming of the fifties—an urban female hero in a realistic setting."<sup>23</sup> However, women play a central role in *Decoy*. There is never an intimation that just because the suspect was a woman that she couldn't have done it. And women

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<sup>21</sup> Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening*, 57-8.

<sup>22</sup> Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Meehan, *Ladies of the Evening*, 73.

are frequently suspects, sometimes killers, and sometimes victims. Sometimes they are all three. Women are never to be dismissed in *Decoy*.

In “High Swing,” poor Annie dies before she even makes it to the hospital. But Casey is on the case, linking the brief bits of information the delirious girl doled out with a series of unsolved muggings, or rather a “hold-up racket that had been plaguing us for months.” Casey’s voice-over transitions us from her professional self in uniform to the vision of her undercover. As is typical in this program, we hear her laugh before we see her. Beverly Garland could put an extraordinary amount of characterization into a laugh. This one is too loud, a little drunk, and a little cheap. Her hair blonde and big and mussed from “snuggling.” She wears a black dress with sheer black netting over the décolletage. Enacting a little performance for Otto who is at the same bar, she tangles herself around an older man at a booth. She steals his and flees. The man doesn’t follow but Otto does. He confronts her, forces her to admit what happens and, with quite a bit of sympathy, offers her in on his scheme and a place to live in his apartment while he’s at it.

This is another terrific performance by Casey (and of course by Beverly Garland). Casey, as Doris the good-time girl, after some initial demurrals, accepts. Doris is hard, vulnerable and desperate, attractive but unable to translate that into anything positive for herself. These qualities evoke realism. Otto brings her back to his apartment to his wife Lily. And before Casey can even get her coat off, Lily is telling her all about tragic trapeze accident that led to the loss of the use of her legs. On the *high swing*, she saw Otto with another woman, lost her grip and fell. The medicalized, pathologized female is transferred from the girl in the ambulance to the woman in the wheelchair. This moment swings us from the realism of Casey’s performance once again into high melodrama.

Otto extricates Doris/Casey from the awkward conversation with Lily and shows Doris to her new room. This is a high amount of intimacy, as they mill uncomfortably around the strange bedroom. She asks, “What’s the angle?” Otto knows what she means (sex) and denies it, looking horrified at the implication: “I have never looked another woman since the night my Lily fell.” This aggressive technique is actively used by Casey within the show in order to get information and *by* the show to reassure us that there is nothing too illicit going on. Casey is highly sexualized (even more than normal) in this episode. And while the audience understands that these seductions are all ploys performed with other under-cover officers, still we see them; they still carry a visual and narrative weight. The program rather boldly exposes the sexual danger and puts it to rest.

Unlike much of popular culture, it is not only women who are punished in this program for “inappropriate” sexual conduct. In fact, part of the appeal of the program is showing all the ways men act badly and have a woman be the agent of their comeuppance. In this episode the sexual misbehavior is firmly in the past, and Otto has been paying for it ever since. This aspect of the show definitely seems to be addressing women, but then there are also episodes about highly masculine topic as well, the boxer who is under pressure from the mob, the guy running a scam at the racetrack, a high stakes gambling ring. In these, Casey still finds the “woman angle,” befriending a sister or girlfriend, or pretending to be a target.

Otto’s scheme is this: he’s a former strongman for the circus who has learned judo in his travels. After whatever young woman he has “adopted” draws the mark out onto the street, he performs a judo stranglehold on them until they pass out and then they rob him. Otto uses the money to keep Lily in heroin that she got addicted to after her accident. Lily pushes and manipulates him. She is the problem. She is passive aggressive. She blames her accident and addiction on him. And she seems to find pleasure in his guilt.

Otto, again in Doris's bedroom, demonstrates the chokehold on her. It is figured as both safe and dangerous. She willingly goes into his arms as he chokes her from behind, but she her face contorts and she grabs his arm as if in real pain. Once again, the threat and idea of sexual violence is broached: it is doubly performative here, doubly removed. Otto is showing Casey, in her role as Doris the goodtime girl, what he *would* do to the suckers she will draw into her orbit. However, there is no denying the real fear on Casey's face as she realizes she can't break free and there is no one to help if Otto were to go too far. The vacant smirk that marks her performance of Doris falls away, but there is no one to see her break character. This enactment raises, or at least causes us to realize, the stakes and the danger that this assignment has for Casey.

When we see Casey seduce her first mark under Otto's tutelage, we do not at first realize the he is a cop, a plant. We see her flirt and smile and seduce. It is not until they sit at a booth and talk that we realize it is all a setup. The performance shifts. The dangerous moment of successful sexual manipulation is diverted back to police work. Interestingly here, it is the man that is in danger; he instructs Casey to give Otto a karate chop if the stranglehold lasts for too long.

After the (faux) robbery, while Otto is out scoring Lily's dope (I use there terms deliberately here, they are part of the shows vocabulary, and again, an evocation of "real-ness") Casey uses her privileged access to the apartment to investigate. Lily is sweating, agitated, clutching her stomach and scratching. Again, while the medicalized woman is a staple of the woman's picture, the realism of this depiction seems to nudge it back into realism as a mode. But Lily is hooked because of a circus accident. The oscillations become dizzying and disorienting. Casey looks in the closet where she finds Annie's things. This is not shown to be clever in any way. There is a suitcase inscribed with the name "Anne," clothing of a young woman and a signed



photograph “For Otto and Lily – with love, Annie” Bearing the photo, she interrogates Lily. Lily tells Casey about killing Annie.

When Lily comes back calm and exalted after she gets her drugs. Casey continues to question Lily as Otto is in the next room. Lily tells the rest of the sordid story, that Annie knew that Otto had killed a man, and that is why they poisoned her. He returns angry: “You question my wife about Anne when she needs a fix and you question her when she is high.” Put that way, Casey’s position does not exactly appear to be the moral high ground. And that is the problem with going undercover. It is always lying. It is always doing bad things in service to the good and it is always morally murky. Melodrama is about moral legibility. And here the melodrama of the plot does not give way to a clear moral position; instead it is ambiguous.

While Otto confesses to Casey in the living room after he sees through her disguise, we see Lily dosing the coffee in the kitchen. This is the only time in the episode that we know more than Casey, where she loses narrative and visual mastery. This does occasionally happen in other episodes. In “Around the World,” for instance, an episode that featured John Cassavetes, Casey is knocked out (herself medicalized) for the entire episode, thus giving space to a more famous actor. Otto, Lily and Casey sit down to coffee in the living room as if they are all perfectly civilized. As they sip, Lily and Otto nod significantly at each other. Casey is suddenly alarmed. “Lily, what’s in this coffee?!!” But this dose is in Otto and Lily’s coffee, not Casey’s. As Casey runs out to get help, the two collapse in an embrace, dead. The melodrama of the performances and the action here operate within the realism of the cop show.

“What I don’t get is why, if he was being good to her, she killed him?” The male officer is trying to make sense of what happened and Casey is there to provide the explanation: “She loved him.” Then he offers to buy Casey a cup of coffee, in the aftermath of the double suicide by heroin-

dosed coffee, with the bodies of the couple still sprawled in the living room. She declines with a shudder, and he leaves. She takes the moment to address the audience directly. Moving over to the wall where she stands next to a clown painting (!) and turns to the camera, repeating her opening lines. “A routine case. That’s what it started out to be. Yet I should know by now that when you come into somebody’s home, you also get into their lives. And when that happens, it’s very hard to remember that it’s a routine case.” The moment is contemplative and self-aware and melancholy. It’s a moment that you don’t see male detective indulge in. However, it is a moment of professionalism, where she re-dons her cop persona, and leaves us with it, rather than her role as come-on girl. Her stance, her walk, her voice all change.

This time, it is not *Dragnet* style voice-over but a direct address. She is speaking to us, to the audience. Annette Kuhn provides this very tidy definition of the woman’s picture: “One of the defining generic features of the woman’s picture as a textual system is its construction of narrative motivated by female desire and its process of spectator identification governed by a female point of view.”<sup>24</sup> What is unique about *Decoy* is that while it is most certainly governed by a female point of view (and nothing orients us more firmly than the framing direct address of each episode) but it is *not* particularly interested in female desire. Or rather, once again, the desiring women are displaced onto the characters in traditionally feminine roles, victims and villains. As a result, I would argue that the program’s address is particularly complex. Who is Casey speaking to at the end of each episode? Who is *Decoy* for?

While *Decoy* as a program is very formulaic, each episode is distinct and activates the modalities in slightly different ways. As with most detectives that appear in a procedural context,

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<sup>24</sup> Kuhn, “Women’s Genres,” 145.

Casey Jones is primarily an Avenger. The tough realism of the voice-over framing and the undercover cases she takes, the seedy underworld she investigates aligns her with this kind of investigator. And once, we are given a glimpse of a backstory when we learn that her fiancé was killed in the line of duty. This kind of backstory is certainly not untypical of a male detective, but is a bit rare for a woman. It is refreshing that there don't seem to be any sexual crimes in her past, but this is balanced out with no actual sexual life in her present, just the facsimile of one as she poses as sexually experienced characters. Everything is poured into the job and nothing reserved for pleasure. And she is dogged in her pursuit of an investigation. She refuses to get distracted. She is driven. "When a life is at stake, we don't give up."<sup>25</sup>

But *Decoy* also activates aspects of the Adventurer. While Casey is a legitimate member of the police force (a fact no one questions at all within the diegesis), and is given cases as such, we still get the idea that she is self-motivated. That is, she's doing it because she enjoys it and she's good at it, even though there are certainly some bleak moments in the show. She is singular and something of a token, she is frequently the only woman in the frame, and always the only female cop. We do not see her at her ease with other policewomen, although she does mentor a younger plain-clothed recruit who is having a rough time in her first couple of weeks. She is an Adventurer in her intrinsic sense of fair-play and the way the program takes us on a journey through New York, from the Upper East Side and Central Park South to the tenements, warehouses and even Coney Island. We are offered the pleasure of seeing exotic worlds.

Perhaps least of all she is Comedic. Although sometimes the storylines spill over in their melodramatic excess to the absurd, the tone is not humorous. She doesn't offer the madcap patter

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<sup>25</sup> "Fiesta at Midnight."

of a screwball heroine or slip between competency and idiocy. But, if she does not follow the Comedic investigators, they do follow her. Casey's way of putting on femininity as a disguise serves as model. In *Fatal Beauty*, for example, Whoopi Goldberg takes on the feminized disguises not too differently than Casey does, although the contrasts are heightened for comedic effect. As with Whoopi, we never witness the process of transformation, only the results. The effort is invisible. Throughout the program, men inevitably underestimate Casey, and like the Comedic investigators, her colleagues trust and admire her. And, finally, like Gracie Hart in *Miss Congeniality*, she *is* the job. We never get a glimpse of her private life. Everything we see, and the tidbits we learn are all oriented towards her work.

And finally, she certainly uses affective techniques in her investigation. She is guided by intuition. In "Tin Pan Alley," for example, she takes a look at a crime scene and *knows* that the record album next to the victim is more important than the wall of photographs of women that her superior wants her to track down. And indeed it is the vital link that leads her to the solution of the case. Her affective intuition is *always* shown to be correct. But it is her *sympathy* that no one can resist. It is a superpower. Whether it is former circus performer jonesing for a fix, or clubfooted girl so angry at her disability that she betrays her own mother, or the guy at the racetrack who got in over his head. If she is not as directly inspired by her love as the Affective investigators, she is always guided by her empathy. If she cannot find a way to like a character, it is definite that he is no good.

In her introduction to *Detecting Women*, Philippa Gates describes a split between two kinds of female detective heroes, the criminologist and the undercover agent. She evokes *Decoy* in the following way when describing the undercover agent: "It is in this undercover mode that the female detective employs the masquerade of femininity to disguise her more "masculine" (i.e. crime-

fighting) abilities from the criminal ring and the threat they imply. In other words, her femininity functions as a decoy—as the television series *Decoy* starring Beverly Garland as an undercover cop confirms.”<sup>26</sup> This split that Gates points to here, the conflict between masculine and feminine is doubled by the conflict between realism and melodrama, between action and reflection, between mastery and vulnerability.

In *Decoy*, Casey Jones is a fully realized female detective in the 1950s, a decade when the figure virtually disappears from film. The attempt to contain the female detective through often uncomfortable generic combinations occurs wherever she appears on film or television because of the ideological discomfort her looking (both on the level of narrative and on the level of the apparatus) creates.

### 6.3 CAGNEY AND LACEY: A QUALITY

#### INTERLUDE

The question of address that haunts *Decoy* does not present a problem to *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-1988), a program that unambiguously hailed women, specifically working women. *Cagney and Lacey* still stands as perhaps the most successful and influential television program featuring investigating women protagonists. Beginning with TV movie in 1981, it aired on CBS in 1982 with a six episode first season starring Tyne Daly as Mary Beth Lacey and Meg Foster as Christine Cagney. The show was cancelled after this initial run, only to be brought back to production with

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<sup>26</sup> Gates, *Detecting Women*, 8.

a new “more feminine”<sup>27</sup> actress, Sharon Gless, playing Cagney. The show was cancelled a second time after the first full season with Gless only to be brought back yet again, this time through an enormous letter writing campaign. From the beginning of the program, this show has inspired an enormous amount of ferment, conflict and energy. In all, the show clocked 125 episodes over seven seasons.

*Cagney and Lacey* became a locus of critical and feminist debate. It certainly was the most written about program in the burgeoning field of feminist television scholarship, and has been considered from a host of perspectives and was hotly debated. In 1989, Lorraine Gamman published the chapter “Watching the Detectives, The Enigma of the Female Gaze” in the book she edited with Margaret Marshment, *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*. In it, she uses *Cagney and Lacey* as something of a set piece from which to argue the possibility of a female gaze, which she sees “as a mockery of machismo [which] offers spectators the possibilities of identifying with the pleasures of activity without the sort of mastery or voyeurism associated with the male gaze position of classic Hollywood cinema.”<sup>28</sup> That is to say, here with this program feminist scholars were able to imagine a way of undoing the patriarchal apparatus of cinema. Now this position was certainly hotly contested, but it’s important to note the way they circle around this show. This attention was aided by the way that CBS marketed the show, putting it the Monday night lineup of “women’s programming” against ABC’s *Monday Night Football*.

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<sup>27</sup> Less dyke-y. An official at CBS famously said that “we’ve perceived them as dykes.” This comment was part of the instigation of the letter writing campaign.

<sup>28</sup> Lorraine Gamman, *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1989), 25.

And of course, it would be impossible not to mention the extraordinary work by Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* from 1994. This is such a vital piece and model of television scholarship *and* it addresses the program directly. I don't wish to retread these avenues that have already been navigated so expertly. But rather I wish to point out the way in which this particular program organized a series of foundational questions at the intersection of television studies and feminist film studies.

So the question then becomes what is it about the show that causes it to act as lightning rod for the debate, for the place to work out these issues? The program became a site to elaborate the way, not just women, but feminisms were depicted on the screen. Some of the conversation circles around the drain of whether *Cagney and Lacey* depict "good" or "bad" feminism, that is, whether it is actually progressive or hopelessly mired in reactionary patriarchal structures.<sup>29</sup>

*Cagney and Lacey* marks the shift in thinking about "Quality" television that arose in the 1980s. And it makes sense to begin to discuss the appellation, "Quality," and its limitations along side *Cagney and Lacey*. Jane Feuer in her article, "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV" articulate the elements that must be present for a program to be considered "quality:"

1. "Soap opera in terms of narrative structure but not in terms of melodramatic style"
2. Elevated language and overlapping dialogue with many quick clever exchanges of wit
3. Juxtaposing moments of comedy with scenes of high seriousness
4. In opposition to trash TV
5. Ensemble cast
6. Multiple storylines
7. Serial narratives

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<sup>29</sup> A lively debate took place along these lines in the pages of *The Feminist Review*. See "Cagney and Lacey Revisited" by Beverly Alcock and Jocelyn Robson. No. 35, Summer 1990 42-53 and "Response: More *Cagney and Lacey*" by Lorraine Gamman. No. 37, Spring 1991, 117-121.

8. High narrative complexity<sup>30</sup>

*Cagney and Lacey* delivers these elements. And most importantly, quality TV delivers a quality audience to advertisers. D'Acci argues that white middle class women, the target audience for the show, were always considered the primary consumers of television and thus the primary target of advertisers. At the same time, while working women between eighteen and fifty-four were the audience of the show and a quality demographic, they were still considered something of a niche, and advertisers liked to address the broadest swath they could.<sup>31</sup> Their resistance can be clearly seen a resistance to the belief in the power of women as audiences.

Mimi White makes this systemic misogyny clear. She shows how the complex ideological constructions in *Cagney and Lacey* in "Ideological Analysis and Television." While *Cagney and Lacey's* address is a liberal feminism, its generic and discursive systems conflict. The program becomes illustrative of the conflict itself and of its competing interpretations.

Like every text in this study, *Cagney and Lacey* is a generic hybrid. D'Acci shows the way in which the generic weight of the show shifted throughout the programs run. The valence moved from action oriented (male) cop show to more talking-centered woman oriented episodes.<sup>32</sup> So while *Decoy* oscillated between realism and melodrama, between male and female oriented storylines and performance styles, the character of Casey Jones stayed remarkably consistent for someone who takes on a new role every episode. Indeed, perhaps it is the very fact that she does that allows the program to maintain both sides. Both Mary Beth and Christine were so very much

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<sup>30</sup> See Jane Feuer, "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV" in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. Eds. Janet MacCabe and Kim Akass. (I.B. Tauras: New York, 2007), 145-157.

<sup>31</sup> D'Acci, *Defining Women*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> D'Acci, *Defining Women*, 105-6.



themselves, that they never were able to utilize (or refused) the fantasy of disguise as a way of working out the tensions of the show. As a result the tension reached into the textual, the generic.

#### **6.4 VERONICA MARS: I WAS HOPING IT WOULD BE YOU**

With *Veronica Mars* (Rob Thomas, 2004-2007), we have a deeply complex narrative construction, with voice-over and a very complicated and interlocking series of timelines involving both analepsis and prolepsis, as well as a fully realized world that explicitly acknowledges class, gender, race and ethnicity. A strong female protagonist—outcast, intelligent, and certainly unconventional, if not unconventionally pretty—is given the narrative authority over the law in the figures of the Sheriff, the ruling class, and the principal of her high school. *Veronica Mars* has a different valence from the many contemporary shows featuring female investigators.<sup>33</sup> The tension between openness and closure, the generic mixing, and lightning swift changes of mood and tone makes *Veronica Mars* a critical loci for understanding the way the female detective works televisually.

*Veronica Mars* occupies a peculiar position as a show. It is beloved of critics (see Heather

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<sup>33</sup> The list is long and varied, but in this list I will attempt to feature shows that have a woman as the central investigative protagonist. If we included women who are on ensemble shows as well the already long list would explode: *Bones*, *The Closer*, *Fringe*, *X-Files*, *Rizzoli and Isles*, *Medium*, *The Ghost Whisperer*, *Saving Grace*, *Cold Case*, *The Killing*, *Top of the Lake*.

Havrilsky, “Mars Attacks!”<sup>34</sup>) and academics (see *Neptune Noir* and *Investigating Veronica Mars* to get a sense of the scope<sup>35</sup>) but was only mildly successful and got cancelled after its third season. *Veronica Mars* did win the AFI Award for Television Program of the year in 2005, a list that certainly leans towards Quality with a capital Q. We might consider it Quality TV; it certainly exhibits many of the characteristics that define Quality, however, it fails to provide perhaps the most important element of Quality TV, a quality demographic, that is, an audience that advertisers seek.<sup>36</sup>

It is a high school melodrama crossed with *noir* detective fiction and the two styles/genres are represented/doubled by intertwining story arcs. The narrative complexity and the generic complexity are linked, just as the comedic and the dramatic are linked, but also serve to offset each other. This explicit and highlighted generic mixing links *Veronica Mars* to other programs that while not “Quality,” could perhaps be considered “quirky.”<sup>37</sup> Shows like *Northern Exposure*, *Ally McBeal*, and *The Gilmore Girls* similarly mix generic structures and tone, but depend on the “quirkiness” of their characters to define them. Like many shows, both quirky and teen, there is a

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<sup>34</sup> Heather Havrilsky, “Mars Attacks,” *Salon*. March 29, 2005.

[http://www.salon.com/2005/03/29/veronica\\_mars/](http://www.salon.com/2005/03/29/veronica_mars/)

<sup>35</sup> *Neptune Noir: Unauthorized Investigations into Veronica Mars*, Edited by Rob Thomas with Leah Wilson. (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2006) is a mixed bag. Organized under the name of Rob Thomas, the creator of the show, and using his remembrances of production of the program to organize the essays, the book ranges from acafandom, to personal essay, to more scholarly articles. *Investigating Veronica Mars: Essays on the Teen Detective Series* (Edited by Rhonda V. Wilcox and Sue Turnbull. McFarland: Jefferson, NC, 2011) is explicitly academic in its scope and approaches.

<sup>36</sup> Feuer, “HBO,” 147.

<sup>37</sup> Shows like *Northern Exposure*, *Ally McBeal*, and *The Gilmore Girls* similarly mix generic structures and tone, but depend on the “quirkiness” of their characters to define them.

great deal of intertextuality, and it served as a launching pad for many other careers.<sup>38</sup> There is something particularly writerly about “quirky” shows, even more perhaps than quality in general. And they are not afraid to show their generic recombinations, indeed, that is understand as part of their appeal. Rob Thomas, the creator of *Veronica Mars*, began his career as a novelist and a high school teacher. In addition, he was a writer for David Kelly’s *Snoops* (2004-2007). *Veronica Mars* began on UPN and when that went under moved to the CW (but was produced by WB - the station of *Buffy* -1997-2003). These are not the normal places of Quality, but perhaps quirky and certainly cult. But Thomas insists that he sees himself as a “*Northern Exposure* writer in a *CSI* world.”<sup>39</sup>

The demands of the milieu, the competing generic imperatives of the teen nighttime soap and the detective story, are highlighted. What makes the show so successful is the way in which it intricately weaves these elements together: the multiple season long story arcs, the individual investigations, and the teen angst dramedy very much along the lines of *My So-Called Life* and *Freak and Geeks*. It shares a wry tone and a love for its female lead with these shows, as well as a commitment to exploring the issues that high school raises. While *Buffy* is clearly a predecessor of *Veronica*, *Veronica*’s Neptune feels quite a bit closer to our own world than *Buffy*’s Sunnydale. The level of realism is critical to the show as it is in *Decoy* and in line with the generic imperatives of the crime drama. It allows us to take *Veronica* seriously even while the show is very funny at times. It’s all in the (very writerly) dialogue, calling to mind similarly writerly shows that indulged their quirk like *Northern Exposure* and *The Gilmore Girls*.

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<sup>38</sup> Leighton Meester - *Gossip Girl*, Jonathan Taylor Thomas, - *Home Improvement*, Max Greenfield - *New Girl*, even an episode featuring Paris Hilton.

<sup>39</sup> Wilcox and Turnbull, *Investigating Veronica Mars*, quoted from a *Television Without Pity* interview, 26.

This generic instability might lead us to consider it a Cult TV show, with the uncertainties that surround the definition of the term. Cult TV is more of a readerly appellation, that is, a mode of reception. Cult TV “caters to *intense* interpretative audience practices”<sup>40</sup> *Veronica Mars* did spark that kind of investment in its audiences, inspiring everything from amateur episode transcription to a ludicrous amount of fan-fiction. Indeed, in a move that might be compared to the letter writing campaign that brought *Cagney and Lacey* back from cancellation, *Veronica Mars* gave rise to the most successful Kickstarter campaign in the platform’s history. Creator Rob Thomas with his stars, Kristen Bell (Veronica), Jason Dohring (Logan), Ryan Hansen and (Dick Casablancas) put together a video asking for fan support to inspire Warner Brothers to greenlight a *Veronica Mars* movie. Within a day they day exceeded their \$2,000,000 goal and within a year the film has been released. Like Quality TV, Cult TV is actively positioned against the mainstream by its producers and its audiences. Indeed, it is the very fact that it is a show with some 66 episodes that allows for the richness of the show and its heroine to emerge. I would argue that the greater room for ambiguity and complexity that television allows through the scope of its serial narratives, that the openness of television is why the female detective flourishes. I would like to continue my analysis in light of the figure of the female detective while not trying to elide the particular televisual dimension of the program.

Historically, there is a link between the serial and the female investigator. The serial Queens of the 1910s established many of the conventions we see in contemporary television shows featuring the figure and also the drive towards and resistance to narrative closure far more than the

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<sup>40</sup> Roberta Pearson, “Observation of Cult Television,” in *The Cult TV Book: From Star Trek to Dexter, New Approached to TV Outside the Box*, ed. Stacey Abbott (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010), 8.

soap operatic serials. However, it more strongly links the show to the female detective's cinematic iterations, which, as we have seen, inevitably are structured around this sort of generic mixing, even if this mixing tends to be more disguised.

As opposed to *Decoy* or even *Cagney and Lacey*, the richness of *Veronica Mars* comes through its seriality. While each episode features a fairly contained investigation with a solid amount of closure, there are several intertwining story arcs that carry through the season (and reemerge re-imagined in the next). The first and organizing question is "Who killed Lilly Kane?" She was Veronica's best friend, daughter of the most influence family in Neptune, Veronica's boyfriend Duncan's sister, and Logan Echoll's girlfriend. This is the question that is posed in the pilot and answered in the finale of the first season.

The murder echoes through the town of Neptune, where the action is set. But the effects are catastrophic in Veronica's life. Her father, Keith Mars, is voted out of office as Sheriff for his perceived mishandling of the case. Their social status plummets, estranging Veronica from the popular crowd at school, and Veronica's mother leaves town and is not heard from again, leading to the hermeneutic question, "What happened to Veronica's mother?" The popular crowd sees her father's suspicion of Jake Kane as a betrayal and she is shunned by her former friends. At an 09er (as the rich popular group is called) party, Veronica is drugged and raped, leading to perhaps the most compelling and controversial subject matter of the show: "Who raped Veronica Mars?" While the murder was horrifying, the rape is defining. Indeed, the rape seems to be behind Veronica's transformation into her current hardboiled persona.<sup>41</sup> And finally there is a high degree

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<sup>41</sup> See Elaine Martaus, "You Get Tough. You Get Even: Rape, Anger, Cynicism, and the Vigilante Girl Detective in *Veronica Mars*" in *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, V 27 n 1:2008, p

of uncertainty introduced about Veronica's paternity, proposing the question, "Who is Veronica's father?" All of the events leading to these questions occur a year before the narrative of Season 1 begins.

Each question refers to a story arc that has its own generic pulls. These story lines are all served and explored through the season and frequently the independent episode investigation will lead to a piece of the puzzle. Most frequently, the episodic investigation is linked to the larger season long questions through a series of affective connections. In "M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction)" (S1, ep. 20) for example, Veronica is helping out a girl who's boyfriend took a sexual video of her and is trying to use it as blackmail so she won't break up with him. Issues around sexual coercion and reputation are particularly compelling to Veronica as a result of her own rape. As that storyline resolves, she finds out that the video was taken at the party where she was raped, and her friend was given the same drug as she was. And most importantly, the person who had the drug was Logan Echolls, Veronica's current boyfriend.

In serialized television, suspending narrative closure is the motor that keeps it in production, in the case of a soap opera like *Guiding Light*, for more than 70 years. But it does this not simply by failing to fill informational gaps, but instead by constantly creating new ones, thus (according to Sternberg's structure) creating surprise. *Veronica Mars'* episode-long mysteries provide strong narrative closure, but each episode simultaneously creates and fills gaps in the season-long mystery arcs. Additionally the transition from the First Season to the Second involves opening a previously closed gap (surprise) moving us once again from detective structure to soap

operatic structure and back again, as that opening is once again closed, although with a radically different solution.

This generic shifting built into the televisual structure of the detective show is what television offers to the female detective. Where the generic shifts in film caused rifts and narrative trauma that frequently found manifestation in an excess on the skin of the film itself, in television, the shifts that the female detective demands don't feel unnatural. They feel exciting. The seriality of soap operas associated with female pleasure and viewing practices work with the detective story to create a place for the figure.

The season features all the melodramatic elements associated with the soap opera: amnesia, rape, disputed paternity, sexual reputation. Not one but two characters are afflicted with amnesia: Veronica who was drugged with GHB at a party and Duncan who had a mental break the night of Lilly's murder. The melodrama of the moment does not work too differently than it operates in *Decoy*.

Together, repetition and amnesia create levels of divided consciousness in the soap opera audience, a precondition for reflexivity...[W]hen amnesia inflects plot repetition, all viewers de facto experience soap opera's Rashomon effect....as amnesia evolved in the soap opera, it now tends to involve personality fragments that blur the distinctions between the "normal" behavior of the character and the repressed self.<sup>42</sup>

The melodramatic excess of multiple amnesia plots allows for both elements that Nochimson describes. While Veronica's amnesiac moment is resolved in an explicitly *Rashoman*-like episode

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<sup>42</sup> Martha P. Nochimson "Amnesia 'R' Us: The Retold Melodrama, Soap Opera, and the Representation of Reality" *Film Quarterly* (Spring 1997), 28-29.

(“A Trip to the Dentist” S1, ep 21) with a multitude of minor characters offering a piece of the puzzle, Duncan’s forgetting is more troubling.

Veronica’s amnesia was the result of a moment of potential violence against her, Duncan’s amnesia is related to *his* moment of violence, and throughout the season his violence and anger seem to simmer below his incredibly bland surface. His own parents believe he killed his sister. He believes he killed his sister. And he believes he is incestuous. He thinks Veronica, with whom he had sex, is also his sister. In this light we can see *Veronica Mars* clear relation to the soap opera and melodrama. But as Jane Feuer reminds us describing *West Wing*, these soapy storylines are not accompanied by the melodramatic style.<sup>43</sup> In *Decoy*, the melodrama is in both the story and in the style of acting of the incidental characters. Beverly Garland as Casey remains remarkable realist in her performance.

However, as Roz Kaveney argues, *Veronica Mars* also includes all the markers of the teen genre: “Accusations of drug use, sexual harassment, pranks, threats to sexual reputation, the kidnapping of team mascots and threats of violence.”<sup>44</sup> Kaveney goes on to situate characters in the show in the context of characters in iconic teen movies like *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1984), *Some Kind of Wonderful* (Howard Deutch, 1987), *Heathers* (Michael Lehman, 1988), *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986), and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004). And it is compelling, but incomplete. Again, the scope of the show resists generic stability. So while it can certainly be included in the teen genre (and indeed the way that melodrama found a home with teens) and the teen genre can be used to illuminate certain elements of the program, that is not all it is.

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<sup>43</sup> Jane Feuer, “HBO and the Concept in Quality TV” 149.

<sup>44</sup> Roz Kaveney, *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film from Heathers to Veronica Mars*. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006) 177.



The *Rashomon*-effects are not confined to issues around failed memory, but to solving the murder itself. Through the season, we see Veronica imagining Lilly's murder over and over, each time articulating a different scenario: Lilly's mother, Celeste Kane, Jake Kane, Duncan etc.... So by the time we do get the final reenactment, the effect has been naturalized. We do not find it as structurally or stylistically difficult as we otherwise might. Instead, these flashbacks and imaginings enrich the narrative and stylistic complexity that the show offers. They mingle with repeated visions of the gory ghost of Lilly Kane, who returns bloody in the pep squad uniform at crucial moments in the narrative.

Rather than the soap operatic, the performances are oriented towards the detective story, and hard-boiled stories in particular. This does not at all imply a greater degree of realism. Instead, they integrate the snappy vocal rhythms of Howard Hawks' films. Everyone seems to have a snappy rejoinder in Neptune. But the performances also have a high level of complexity, shifting from high affective, to romantic to comedic and back to hardboiled with a rapid-fire clarity. Sue Turnbull suggests in "Performing *Veronica Mars*" that we need to think of the performances in the show through three dimensions:

- The narrative – involving the relationship of performance to plot;
- The melodramatic – involving the relationship of performance to place;
- The comedic – involving the relationship of performance to the camera<sup>45</sup>

I do not wish to muddy the waters with yet another definition of melodrama and the melodramatic, but this tripartite system seems a useful one for thinking through this particular

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<sup>45</sup> Turnbull, "Performing *Veronica Mars*" in *Investigating Veronica Mars*, 39. She takes this approach from Andrew Klevan and his book *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation*.

program. In addition, Turnbull's analysis of the performances and the way in which they quickly switch registers mirrors the way in which I see the program operating as a whole. Indeed, it is in the lightning shift register shifts that much of the program's pleasures and affect emerges.

I would like to read a single episode in light of the season and the show as a whole to examine how the program functions and how the figure of the female detective cycles between modalities using the ideas of genre, closure and performance. The episode is a particularly dense one towards the end of the first season where all of the entangled storylines come to a head and begin their moves toward closure. It is also an episode of high romantic affect.

"Weapons of Class Destruction" (S1, ep. 18) activates all of the genres we have discussed. We will see how in this single episode Veronica shifts through all four modalities. The main investigative plot of the episode revolves around a series of bomb threats to the school that evoke both Columbine and the film *Heathers* (Michael Lehman, 1988).<sup>46</sup> In addition, it introduces Wallace's mother as a love interest for Veronica's dad, which creates tension between the two friends, and escalates the urgency around Veronica's mother's disappearance. Duncan finds out that Veronica is still investigating him for Lilly's murder and of course a season's worth of tension and chemistry explodes between Logan and Veronica.

*Veronica Mars* operates primarily in the Avenger mode, but as we will see, it is illuminating to consider her through the lens of all four. The Adventurer is marked by her endless curiosity and her avatar is Nancy Drew. The Comedic investigator operates within a zone of indeterminacy that is counter-balanced by the presence of a man. This comes out on the level of

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<sup>46</sup> For a full discussion on the relationship of *Heathers* to *Veronica Mars* see Roz Kaveney's *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film from Heathers to Veronica Mars*.

character, and the level of genre. The Comedic mode is not necessarily where the humor comes from. The Avenger seeks justice but has a tendency to operate outside the law that will never acknowledge her legitimacy, but is still compelled to investigate. And finally there is the Affective investigator who is drawn into investigations because of personal ties of love and family and uses techniques outside of the masculine realms of logic and ratiocination, following feminine or motherly intuition and psychic abilities. The emotional register is given a primacy in the affective mode and an awareness of the intricacies of relationships is one of her primary tools of investigation.

We will begin looking at “Weapons of Class Destruction” through the lens of the Adventurer. Early in the season, Veronica has joined the school newspaper and found an easy alignment of her photography and investigative skills as well as some of the only encouragement and support she has received in school this year. Explicitly calling back to the female newspapermen of the 30s, the investigation opens because Veronica was curious (the cardinal sign of the Adventurer) about a series of unexplained fire drills. When the investigation begins, she has little stake in it. She is just interested. What seems like nothing (fire drills), quickly becomes something (bomb threats). Her initial foray into the story takes her to Vice Principal Clemens’ office: “So what’s the skinny on the fire drills, Mr. C? Faulty hotplate in the faculty lounge? Gremlin gumming up the works?” Her relationship with him echoes Nancy Drew’s with Captain Tweedy. Indeed, one of the Bonita Granville films was *Nancy Drew: Reporter*. The alignments are clear. While she frequently has the upper hand (as she quickly gains in this episode by impersonating someone from the school board on the phone, a ploy Clemens easily falls for), it is marked by his repeated attempts to humiliate her. Unlike Nancy Drew, she does not take it but constantly fights back. In the pilot for example, she knows about a “random” locker search that is

clearly targeted towards her, and has emptied her locker and put Clemens picture in a heart-shaped frame, to his chagrin. Veronica Mars is repeatedly compared to Nancy and underestimated because of it. This is hardly surprising given their nature and their cuteness, but as we will see, Veronica moves it to a much darker place.

Veronica also has a relationship with her father that bears a strong resemblance to Nancy and her father's. While Nancy's father is a lawyer, his status and knowledge grounds her own. And like Nancy and her dad, it is just the two of them. There is no mother in evidence. This alignment with the Father and with the masculine is typical of the Adventurer. It marks her difference from other women. However, Veronica and Keith's relationship is built on mutual trust and witty repartee. It is in their discourse that we see how Veronica became who she is, funny, loyal and quick-witted. Their love and faith for each other articulated through the seamless flow of patter is the emotional backbone of the show. The strength of their relationship is evidenced not just in the fact that she is literally following in his footsteps, helping with his private investigations, but making her own. Their relationship is so strong that even as she realizes her paternity is in question, holds the result of a DNA test in her hands, she tears it up without looking. Her love for him is stronger than her curiosity.

Veronica, as a school newspaper reporter, breaks the story and following up, follows the new outsider Ben (Jonathan Taylor Thomas) to the Camelot hotel (the seedy motel where we first met Veronica) and then to a garden supply store where he buys a great deal of fertilizer and reveals an assault rifle in his trunk. While she is watching, Logan (Lilly's boyfriend and Duncan's best friend) calls her, warning her that Duncan knows about her file on him about Lilly's murder. The call breaks her concentration, allowing Ben to slip into her car. She drops the phone, but we see Logan continuing to listen. Veronica cleverly gets Ben to tell her where they are going so Logan

can hear. As Ben is hustling her into a room back at the Camelot, Logan appears, as if by magic, and punches him out. As he falls, Ben's wallet identifying him as an ATF agent falls out. Asking Logan to leave, Ben enlists Veronica's aid. Upon agreeing, she leaves the room and gives a quick thank you kiss to the waiting Logan, marking the definitive shift that his rescue precipitated. As she turns to leave, he grabs her arm and kisses her properly.

I proposed in the comedic chapter that the cardinal sign of the Comedic Investigator is her indeterminacy, and that this exhibits itself on multiple levels. *Veronica Mars* consciously uses this indeterminacy to her own ends. In *There's Always a Woman*, it is impossible to determine whether Sally Reardon is an idiot or a genius. Assumptions and stereotypes about woman serve to fuel the difficulty. Veronica is fully aware of the assumptions that people make about her (and there are many) and uses them to her advantage in various ways. Refreshingly, not all of these assumptions are gender-based: while there is a rampant sexual rumor mill that runs non-stop at Neptune High, people are also scared of her. Her very appearance serves as a disguise; the pretty, petite blonde teenager (like Buffy) hides a surprising wallop of whip smarts. While Veronica can hold her own against physical intimidation (with her trusty pitbull Backup and a Taser), this also comes as a surprise. However, the show also functions in the realm of indeterminacy on the level of genre, and through its dialogue.

As Veronica begins the more dangerous part of her investigation, shifting from the relatively safe confines of the school to the more dangerous terrain of Neptune at large, she says: "A girl must prioritize. Wallowing in the grief of betraying an ex-boyfriend, or following the guy most likely to blow up Neptune High. Hell, give me a stick of gum to chew and I'll do all three at once." This quotation makes explicit the genre mixing that occurs not just on the level of narrative

structure, but on the surface of the film in Veronica's voice-over. The voice-over frequently links scenes that operate at different generic levels. It does not prioritize between the storylines, but holds them simultaneously. Their juxtaposition is what makes the show breathe, lends it its humor and its affective weight. The very real threats are brought down to the level of teen pics; the teen melodrama storylines are elevated to life and death scenarios. It is the indeterminacy, more than anything, that marks her as a Comedic investigator.

We see her use Logan the way the Comedic investigators use their male counterparts, with a sort of split second timing to engineer their own rescue. Their ability to work together in this way (as in Howard Hawks) shows the rightness of their romantic connection. It is no coincidence that this encounter with Logan had both them working together as a team and their first kiss. The kiss culminates a season worth of tension and heartache. But we have seen Veronica kiss boys before. Indeed, the episode begins with her kissing her deputy boyfriend, Leo on her front porch. This is different. The exchange of looks before Veronica leaves has such a weight that it shifts the trajectory of the next two seasons. Their blank glances seem to hold all the wonder and question and confusion in the world.

It's a riveting performance; both characters seem to drop their masks and reveal their true faces. We could read it through all three of the dimensions of performance that Turnbill proposes: narrative, melodramatic and comedic, that is, in terms of plot, place, and the camera. This is both a sign of the importance of the moment, and the generic crossroads the performance stands in. This scene also marks a moment of excessive camera motion that reads as more cinematic than televisual. And in the motion we see the generic combination writ large. As they kiss, there is a swooping crane shot that circles them as the obligatory modern rock ballad comes up marking its romantic teen soap operatic moment. As they break apart from their kiss there are a series of close-

up shot/reverse-shots that show their wondering faces, again keeping us in the romantic (and rather sophisticated mode) as their season long antagonism seems to be resolved.

As without a word, Veronica turns and walks away, that same crane camera of the romantic swooping moves to a new effect. They are on the balcony of the second floor of the motel and the shot pulls out and down so we cannot only see Logan, seemingly rooted to the spot, but Veronica as she walks down the stairs to her car. It settles for a moment in a low angle shot that gets the both of them from the rear fender of Veronica's car. The angle is odd and reminiscent of *noir*, the other clear influence on the episode, reminding us of the other generic pole of the show. And then slips quickly back to a shot reverse shots: a close up of Logan's face and medium shot of Veronica as she gets into her car.

Perhaps most startlingly, the sequence is offered without dialogue or voice-over. She comes out of the motel room and Logan asks, "You okay?" Veronica says, "Mmhmm." And the rest of scene is without words until she gets in her car and drives away. The transition moment, from this kiss with Logan to the next leg of the investigation would be a moment where, typically, we would get some sort of voice-over commentary. But here it is absent, as if what has happened is too big to talk about. This is significant considering all the difficult things that Veronica has been through in the last year or so. The absence gives it a visceral weight in the episode, a sort of black hole. Veronica goes on to investigate Norris, and offers voice-over commentary, but makes no mention of what just happened with Logan. At the end of the episode, back in the newspaper office, Logan and Veronica exchange a look, full of chemistry. But again, no commentary. The lack of commentary points to the openness of the moment. If the confession of the criminal is the ultimate moment of Narrative closure, than a wordless kiss between two erstwhile enemies is its opposite.

Veronica Mar's personal motto seems to be "You get tough, you get even." This is very much in line with the way in which the Avenger functions. After seeing her father voted out as sheriff and the new sheriff humiliatingly dismiss her attempt to report her own rape, asking her, "Is there anyone in particular you'd like me to arrest, or should I round up the sons of the most important families in town?" (S1 e1), Veronica no longer believes in the effectiveness of the law to get justice on issues large or small. Throughout the season, she attempts to get justice for those without. Often it is a sort of poetic justice, the kind that stings, especially in high school. But she is single-minded and absolutely dedicated while she is out for these things.

While Veronica is not a femme fatale, she, typically of investigators in the Avenger mode, often goes in disguise.<sup>47</sup> The disguise makes explicit the idea that femininity is a masquerade rather than any sort of naturalized inevitability. The teen genre is the perfect place to explore issues of gender performance. So many of them are obsessed with issues around appearance and "correct" gender identification. Veronica uses these issues to her own advantage. When she is speaking to Ben in his room, over her shoulder is a silhouette of a naked woman (mud-flap style) signaling the sleaziness of the hotel and as Ben suggests that his suspect Norris "likes" Veronica, the implication is clear. He clearly has a sense of Veronica's trouble-making investigations. Despite the fact that she got the jump on him with her own quick thinking, Ben suggests that she seduce Norris in order to get the information that he needs as if this is the only tool in her arsenal. While Veronica is not above using her cuteness to achieve her own ends, she has not used sex to get what she wanted. She uses her head. Ben's underestimation of Veronica illustrates, once again, the failure of the

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<sup>47</sup> Rob Thomas claims that Duncan Kane was conceived of as an homme fatale.



Law.

The anti-authoritarian bent of the Avenger mode is reinforced and explored by the fact that Ben the ATF agent set Norris up. In his desire to keep his perfect record, he just needed to get someone, rather than necessarily the correct culprit. Ben also stands as an object lesson for Veronica, illustrating the danger of going too far. In fact she and Ben have a great deal in common. They both are dogged and both go under cover, and ask favors to get what they need. The difference is that Ben does not seem to be interested in justice, but rather with being the youngest agent with the most arrests. He says, “Oh, I *will* bust him. Be sure of that. I’ve got more arrests on my record than any ATF agent my age, ever. Failure is not an option.” This is the Avenger gone too far. Veronica always has this potential, to be so convinced that she is right, that she will do anything to prove it. As Logan asks her in the previous episode: “What do you think Lilly would make of you investigating the people who loved her?” As she has shown throughout the season, her methods are not always on the up and up. She has falsified information, pretended to be people she is not, taken advantage of her friends. In fact, she frequently does whatever she feels is necessary to gain the information she desires. What then is the difference between her and Agent Ben? The difference is her answer: “I loved Lilly. Maybe if I didn’t I could drop this.”

This puts her in the Affective mode. The Affective modality might seem an uncomfortable match for the girl who said in the pilot, “Sooner or later, the people you love let you down.” However, Veronica’s loyalty and faith in the people she loves, her intuition about their true selves and goals, while not always correct, guides her investigation. With everything that has happened, Veronica no longer trusts her feelings. This is marked by the fact that she keeps files on everyone. But on the smaller, episodic scale, she trusts her gut (which is what feminine intuition

is called when a man has it). In “Weapons of Class Destruction,” she is reluctant to believe Norris is the bomber, not just because he was nice to her. Simply by her relationship to the suspect, she knows that he is not guilty. She knows not because he asked her out, or because she seduced the truth out of him, but because he rescued her from spitballs the year before. When she was vulnerable after being ostracized by the 09ers, he didn’t bully her, he protected her. Her experience is with the true Norris, and no amount of evidence to the contrary is going to make her reevaluate it.

The way that the program operates within the Affective mode is most clearly seen in her relationship with her father. We saw, when thinking about the Adventurer, that Veronica and Keith’s relationship mirrors Nancy and Carson Drew’s. Veronica’s absolute faith in her father is the only thing that keeps her grounded when everything else changed. The combination of her love for him and her love for Lilly is what motivates the action. With the complication of Keith and Alicia beginning to date, Veronica is deeply conflicted. While there is the requisite gross out factor of one’s parents dating, it is compounded by the fact that Alicia is her best friend Wallace’s mother (“On the bright side, if our parents get hitched, we could have bunk beds and stay up all night talking...I’ve always wanted a little brother I could dress up like a little doll.”). She resists the relationship between Keith and Alicia because she already has a plan in place to bring her family back together. Veronica has tracked down her mother, uncovered why she left (to protect Veronica), and put her in rehab so she can come home and they can be a family again. The desire for the intact family as a motivation for an investigation is typical of the Affective mode and its reliance on the maternal melodrama. The seeming resolution of Veronica finding her mother serves to open up a new set of questions.

Each move toward episodic closure also includes a clue about the larger narrative questions of the season. That is, each closure is also a propulsion, answering a question that drives the mystery forward. The significance is not only the level of the mystery however, but on the other generic level of teen romance. So what answers a question on the level of the mystery, poses a question on the level of romance. The generic mixing is what serves to propel the narrative forward through their competing structural imperatives.

At the very end of the highly melodramatic final episode of the first season, Veronica opens the door to her apartment, smiles and says, “I was hoping it would be you.” We never see who knocked. The questions introduced in the pilot are all answered. We know who killed Lilly Kane, who Veronica’s father really is, what happened to her mother and how she lost her virginity. We do not know where the next season is going to take us. But the continuation is clearly linked through the personal: is it her father home from the hospital, her mother reconsidering the stolen money, Duncan her first boyfriend and Lilly’s brother and NOT Veronica’s, or Logan, Aaron’s son and Veronica’s erstwhile boyfriend, or perhaps her best friend, Wallace whose mother we saw reunited with Veronica’s father. This ending, with its paradigmatic evocation, orients the show to its seriality even at the moment of extremely high narrative closure.

I believe that these modalities I have described are incredibly useful in analyzing women detectives on television, however, the shows I was thinking about shift between these modes, and or perhaps because, television series function differently from films as a result of their seriality. By examining *Veronica Mars* we can see how this program mobilizes these modes and shift among them, both in the program as a whole and within particular episodes. This is a function of its position between a series and a serial. This has to do with the idea of narrative closure, a notion critical to understanding both the detective story and the kind of program that *Veronica Mars*

represents. While films tend to operate within one specific modality, television programs, with their far greater scope, tend to cycle between them from episode to episode and even within episodes. The modalities, however, remain remarkably stable and retain their explanatory power. The purpose of this is not simply to show the effectiveness of my model, but to answer the question as to why the investigating woman has found such a happy home on television and been banished to the peripheries of film histories.

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## 8.0 FILMOGRAPHY

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*Act of Vengeance* (Bob Kelljan, 1974) *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974)  
*Adventurous Blonde* (Frank McDonald, 1937)  
*After the Thin Man* (1936)  
*Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979)  
*Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986)  
*Along Came a Spider* ([Lee Tamahori](#), 2001)  
*Amazing Mr. Williams* (Alexander Hall, 1939)  
*American Crime* (Dan Minz, 2004)  
*Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992)  
*Beatrice Fairfax* (Leopold and Theodore Wharton, 1916)  
*Betrayed* (Costa-Gravas, 1988)  
*Big Sleep, The* (Howard Hawkes, 1942)  
*Black Angel* (Roy William Neill, 1946)  
*Black Widow* (Bob Rafelson, 1987)  
*Blade of Scotland Yard* (Robert F. Hill, 1937)  
*Bladerunner* (Ridley Scoot, 1981)  
*Blondes at Work* (Frank McDonald, 1938)  
*Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1990)  
*Bodily Harm* (James Lemmo, 1995)  
*Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981)  
*Body of Evidence* (Uli Edel, 1992)  
*Bone Collector, The* (Phillip Notuve, 1999)  
*Bound* (Larry Wachowski, 1996)  
*Brave One, The* (Neil Jordan, 2007)  
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*C.I.A.: Code Name Alexa* (Joseph Merhi, 1992)  
*Call Me Bwana* (Gordon Douglas, 1963)  
*Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976)  
*Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942)  
*Charade* (Stanley Donen, 1963)  
*Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000)  
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*Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974)  
*Christmas Holiday* (Robert Siodmak, 1944)  
*Cleopatra Jones* (Jack Starrett, 1973)  
*Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (Charles Bail, 1975)  
*Coma* (Michael Crichton, 1978)  
*Compromising Positions* (Frank Perry, 1985)



*Copycat* (Jon Amiel, 1995)  
*Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004)  
*D.E.B.S* (Angela Robinson, 2004)  
*D.O.A* (Rudolf Mate, 1950)  
*Daisy Kenyon* (Otto Preminger, 1947)  
*Damned Don't Cry, The* (Vincent Sherman  
*Dark Corner* (Henry Hathaway, 1946)  
*Dark Waters* (Andre De Toth, 1944)  
*Day of the Woman or I Spit on your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978)  
*Dear Detective* (Phllipe de Broca, 1977)  
*Death Weekend* (Willaim Fruet, 1976)  
*Destination Murder* (Edward L. Cahn, 1950)  
*Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971)  
*Domino* (Tony Scott, 2005)  
*Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944)  
*Double Jeopardy* (Bruce Beresford, 1999)  
*Dragonwyck* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1946)  
*Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980)  
*Drowning By Numbers* (Peter Greenaway, 1987)  
*Enforcer, The* (James, Fargo, 1976)  
*Entrapment* (Jon Amiel, 1999)  
*Exploits of Elaine, The* (Louis J. Gasnier, 1914)  
*Eyes of Laura Mars* (John Carpenter, 1978)  
*Fallen Angel* (Otto Preminger, 1946)  
*Fangs of the Living Dead* (Armando de Ossorio, 1968)  
*Fargo* (Coen Brothers, 1996)  
*Fatal Beauty* (Tom Holland, 1987)  
*Fatal Hour* (D.W. Griffith, 1908)  
*FBI Girl* (William Berke, 1951)  
*Federal Agents vs. The Underworld, Inc.* (Fred Brannon, 1949)  
*First Name: Carmen* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1983)  
*Fly Away Baby* (Frank McDonald, 1937)  
*Foreign Affair, A* (Billy Wilder, 1948)  
*Foreign Correspondent* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940)  
*Friday Foster* (Arthur Marks, 1975)  
*Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980)  
*Front Page* (Lewis Milestone, 1931)  
*G.I. Jane* (Ridley Scott, 1997)  
*Gaslight* (George Cuckor, 1944)  
*General's Daughter, The* (Simon West, 1999)  
*Gift, The* (Sam Raimi, 2000)  
*Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946)  
*Girl from Scotland Yard, The* (Robert Vignola, 1937)  
*Gloria* (John Cassavetes, 1980)  
*Gold Racket, The* (Louis Gasnier, 1937)

*Goodbye, Lover* (Roland Joffe, 1999)  
*Gothika* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 2003)  
*Grifters, The* (Stephen Frears, 1990)  
*Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978)  
*Halloween H2O: 20 Years Later* (Steve Miner, 1998)  
*Hanna* (Joe Wright, 2011)  
*Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001)  
*Harriet the Spy* (1996)  
*Hazards of Helen* (J.P McGowan and James d. Davis, 1914)  
*Heat, The* (Paul Feig, 2013)  
*Heathers* (Michael Lehman, 1988)  
*His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940)  
*Hostel: Part 2* (Eli Roth, 2007)  
*House on Carroll Street* (Peter Yates, 1988)  
*Humoresque* (Jean Negulesco, 1946)  
*I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997)  
*I Love Trouble* (Charles Shyer, 1994)  
*I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978)  
*I Wake Up Screaming* (Bruce Humberstone, 1941)  
*I Walk With a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943)  
*I Want to Live!* (Robert Wise, 1958)  
*In a Lonely Place* (Nicolas Ray 1950)  
*In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007)  
*Insomnia* (Christopher Nolan, 2002)  
*Kill Bill V. 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003)  
*Kill Bill V. 2* (Quentin Tarantino, 2004)  
*Killers, The* (Robert Siodmak, 1946)  
*La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990)  
*Lady From Shanghai, The* (Orson Welles, 1948)  
*Lady on a Train* (Charles David, 1945)  
*Lady Vanishes, The* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1938)  
*Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)  
*Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001)  
*Leopard Woman, The* (Wesley, Ruggles 1920)  
*Les Vampires* (Louis Feuillade, 1915)  
*Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987)  
*Lipstick* (Lamont Jackson, 1976)  
*Long Kiss Goodnight* (Renny Harlin, 1996)  
*Long Kiss Goodnight, The* (Renny Harlin, 1996)  
*Lost Angel* (Dimitri Logothetis, 2004)  
*Lucille Love, Girl of Mystery* (1914)  
*Mad Miss Manton* (Leigh Jason, 1938)  
*Maltese Falcon* (John Huston 1941)  
*Marked Woman* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937)  
*Mata Hari* (Georege FitzMorice, 1932)

*Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004)  
*Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945)  
*Miss Congeniality* (Donald Petrie, 2000)  
*Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* (John Pasquin, 2005)  
*Miss Pinkerton* (Lloyd Bacon, 1932)  
*Miss Sherlock Holmes* (Edwin Porter, 1908)  
*Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (Doug Limen, 2005)  
*Mr. Brooks* (Bruce A. Evans, 2007)  
*Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981)  
*Murder Ahoy* (George Pollock, 1964)  
*Murder at the Gallop* (George Pollack, 1963)  
*Murder at the Gallop* (Ronald Goodwin, 1963)  
*Murder By Death* (Robert Moore, 1976)  
*Murder by Numbers* (Barbet Schroeder, 2002)  
*Murder Most Foul* (George Pollack, 1965)  
*Murder on a Honeymoon* (Lloyd Corrigan, 1935)  
*Murder, She Said* (George Pollock, 1962)  
*Mystery of the Double Cross* (Louis Gasnier and William Parke, 1917)  
*Naked Vengeance* (Cirio H. Santiago, 1985)  
*Nancy Drew—Detective* (William Clemens, 1938)  
*Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter* (William Clemens, 1939)  
*Nancy Drew: Mystery of the Hollywood Hills* (Andrew Fleming, 2007)  
*Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987)  
*Night Nurse* (William Wellman, 1931)  
*Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984)  
*Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939)  
*Straner on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940)  
*No Country for Old Men* (Coen Brothers, 2009)  
*Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946)  
*Out of Sight* (Steven Soderbergh 1998)  
*Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947)  
*Pelican Brief* (Alan J. Pakula, 1993)  
*Penalty, The* (Wallace Worsely, 1920)  
*Penguin Pool Murder, The* (George Archinbaud, 1932)  
*Perils of Our Girl Reporters* (George Terwilliger, 1916)  
*Perils of Pauline* (Louis Gasnier and Donald MacKenzie, 1914)  
*Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944)  
*Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)  
*Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986)  
*Question of Silence, A* (Marleen Gorris, 1983)  
*Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)  
*Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940)  
*Saboteur* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1942)  
*Savage Street* (Danny Steinman, 1984)  
*Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996)

*Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995)  
*Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1948)  
*Serial Killer* (Pierre David, 1995)  
*Seventh Victim* (Mark Robson, 1943)  
*Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943)  
*Shadow of Stamboul* (Andrew Martin, 1936)  
*Sheba, Baby* (William Girdler, 1975)  
*Sherlock Holmes* (Guy Ritchie, 2009)  
*Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (Arthur Marvin, 1900)  
*Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows* (Guy Ritchie, 2011)  
*Sherlock, Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924)  
*Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991)  
*Sinful Cargo* (Crane Wilbur, 1936)  
*Sisters* (Brian De Palma, 1973)  
*Smart Blonde* (Frank MacDonald, 1936)  
*Smilla's Sense of Snow*  
*Some Kind of Wonderful* (Howard Deutch, 1987)  
*Sorry Wrong Number* (Anatole Litvak, 1948)  
*Stage Fright* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1950)  
*Stranger Among Us* (Sidney Lumet, 1992)  
*Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940)  
*Sudden Fear*: (David Miller, 1952)  
*Sunset Murder Case* (Louis Gasnier, 1938)  
*Suspicion* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941)  
*Sylvia Scarlett* (George Cukor, 1935)  
*Taking Lives* (D.J. Caruso, 2004)  
*Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974)  
*There's Always a Woman* (Alexander Hall, 1938)  
*Thin Man, The* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1934)  
*This Gun For Hire* (Frank Tuttle, 1942)  
*Thomas Crown Affair* (John McTeirnan, 1999)  
*Thomas Crown Affair* (Norman Jewison, 1968)  
*Thriller* (Sally Potter, 1979)  
*To Catch a Thief* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1955)  
*Torchy Blane in Chinatown* (William Beaudine, 1939)  
*Torchy Blane in Panama* (William Clemends, 1938)  
*Torchy Blane Runs for Mayor* (Ray McCarey, 1939)  
*Torchy Blane...Playing with Dynamite* (Noel Smith, 1939)  
*Torchy Gets Her Man* (William Beaudine, 1938),  
*Traffic in Souls* (George Loane Tucker, 1913)  
*Twisted* (Phillip Kaufman, 2004)  
*Undercover Woman* (Thomas Carr, 1946)  
*V.I. Warshawski* (Jeff Kanew, 1991)  
*Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)  
*Violated* (Richard Cannistraro, 1984)

*Wax Museum* (Michael Curtiz, 1933)  
*Wayne Murder Case/A Strange Adventure* (Hampton Del Ruth, 1932)  
*Weight of Water* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2000)  
*What Happened to Mary* (Charles Brabin, 1912)  
*When were you born?* (William C, McGann, 1938)  
*Wicked as They Come* (Ken Hughes, 1957)  
*Woman in Grey* (James Vincent, 1921)  
*World is Not Enough, The* (Michael Apted, 1999)  
*Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012)

## 9.0 TV-OGRAPHY

*Dragnet* (1951-59)  
*Guiding Light* (1952-2009)  
*Decoy* (1957-1958)  
*The Avengers* (1961-69)  
*Honey West* (1965-66)  
*The Girl from U.N.C.L.E* (1966-1967)  
*The Mod Squad* (1968-1973)  
*Policewoman* (1974-1978)  
*Charlie's Angels* (1976-1981)  
*Hill Street Blues* (1981-87)  
*Cagney and Lacey* (1982-88)  
*Remington Steele* (1982-1987)  
*Moonlighting* (1984-1989)  
*Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996)  
*21 Jump Street* (1987-1990)  
*Northern Exposure* (1990-95)  
*Prime Suspect* (Christopher Menaul, 1990-1996)  
*Silk Stalkings* (1991-1995)  
*Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993-1999)  
*X-Files* (1993-2002)  
*My So-Called Life* (1994-95)  
*Ally McBeal* (1997-2002)  
*Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)  
*VIP* (1998-2002)  
*Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000)  
*Law and Order: SVU* (1999-)  
*West Wing* (1999-2006)  
*CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-)  
*The Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007)  
*Crossing Jordan* (2001-2007)  
*CSI: Miami* (2002-2012)  
*Without a Trace* (2002-2009)  
*Monk* (2002-2009)  
*The Wire* (2002-2008)  
*Bones* (2003-)  
*Cold Case* (2003-2010)  
*CSI: New York* (2004-2013)  
*Snoops* (2004-2007)  
*Veronica Mars* (2004-2007)  
*The Closer* (2005-2012)

*The Ghost Whisperer* (2005-2010)  
*Medium* (2005-2011)  
*Saving Grace* (2007-2010)  
*Women's Murder Club* (2007-2008)  
*Life* (2007-)  
*Fringe* (2008-2013)  
*In Plain Sight* (2008-2012)  
*The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* (2008-2009)  
*Castle* (2009-)  
*Southland* (2009-2013)  
*Sherlock* (2010-)  
*Rizzoli and Isles* (2010-)  
*Homeland* (2011-)  
*The Killing* (2011-)  
*Top of the Lake* (2013)